Highway through the Stars

by Tayijo

Notes

This story is complete! I haven't added many tags because I like the idea of cover copy better and am a big enough nerd to make a cover for my own fic. I hope that works for y'all. There is also a soundtrack because, like I said: giant nerd.

Check it out on spotify: open.spotify.com/user/rixonkj/playlist/2j8igr9PgDF7KDIYjQIUi0
or on Tidal: tidal.com/playlist/963c5b04-1740-4053-a0b5-0dcff10cf2a

I owe a great deal of thanks to dancinguniverse, who beta read this. All remaining mistakes are my own.
Chapter 1

Highway through the Stars

Featuring: writing against the abusive nature of the incarceration state  
fully automatic handguns  ZERO women in refrigerators  muscles  
queer sex written by a real queer  men AND women of color  
undercover boyfriends  fast cars  
more Russian mobsters than the entire executive branch of the United States government  
so many fast cars

did I mention the queer sex? this fic is NC-17; NSFW

After totaling his life as a cop in Los Angeles because he couldn’t bear to see Dominic Toretto go to prison, Brian O’Connor did his best to escape the authorities and his own broken heart by burying himself in the southern Florida racing scene. Now, restless, his eye is set on a dangerous job in Las Vegas. Danger, after all, is one of just two things in the world that make him feel alive...

Dominic Toretto almost destroyed his family when his high-risk hijacking scheme went south. It’s taken him three years to get his team back in working order, and it’s meant making compromises. Now he’s throwing a wedding for the love of his life—but she’s marrying another man. Good thing Vegas is a city full of distractions...

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"Dominic Toretto almost destroyed his family when his high-risk hijacking scheme went south. It’s taken him three years to get his team back in working order, and it’s meant making compromises. Now he’s throwing a wedding for the love of his life—but she’s marrying another man. Good thing Vegas is a city full of distractions..."
Brian spun his cell phone between his thumb and middle finger, tapped it against the bar, and
thumbed it open for the third time in ten seconds: still no new text from Daisy. That wasn’t
surprising. With any luck, it meant she was driving, and not still peering into her bathroom mirror,
perfecting her mascara. He should know by now to never show up on time for drinks with Daisy.
As Isay Mozhayev’s wife, she had very few chances to control her life, and he was pretty sure her
perpetual lateness was some kind of backlash against Isay’s micro-management. He didn’t blame
her; he was mostly irritated with himself for showing up at nine just because Daisy had texted him,
letsssee ninew ould be good yea? a string of emojis, and then gon to karaokkeee!

There were also no new texts from the guy he’d been messaging on Grindr. Or the other guy, the
one he’d made out with the last time he got drinks with Daisy and her friends, in his phone only as
‘Badlands Saloon.’ Yulya had wanted a gay cowboy night, and Daisy had rolled her eyes and
gone along with it, cheering at Brian when Mr. Badlands Saloon started trying to pick him up. He
wasn’t much of a kisser, but the mostly ridiculous sexting gave Brian something to laugh over
with Daisy. And that was why he was here, being a bored housewife’s gay best friend: because
Isay Mozhayev was the derzhatel obschaka, the bookkeeper, for the local branch of the Bratva,
and Brian’s job was to bond with his wife.

Daisy was surprisingly easy to be friends with: clever but a high school dropout, ambitious and
beautiful but disaffected because the powerful men in her world saw her as nothing but a nice pair
of tits. She had no work to take up her energy, so she occupied herself with creating drama,
spreading gossip, and partying hard. She was Vietnamese, born in Da Nang and brought to the
US undocumented as a toddler, but Isay had provided her with papers and money, a beautiful
house and an empty life, and she’d adopted the Russian love of alcohol like she was born to it.
Her friends, all wives of members of the Bratva, drank as heavily as she did. Brian sometimes had
to hustle to keep up, or at least, to keep up and still keep his senses sharp.

He checked his phone again, idly flipping through Grindr in search of someone hotter or at least
more entertaining, half an eye on his surroundings. There shouldn’t be any particular danger here
at the Five o’Clock. The bar manager was in debt to the Bratva and sometimes paid down the debt
with information. And he could see a solitary Bratva footsoldier in a booth, having dinner with a
heavily made-up woman who was either an escort or auditioning for her own position as a bored
housewife—or both—but that was fine. As far as the Bratva knew, he was supposed to be there,
waiting for Daisy. But still, he wasn’t about to start playing Candy Crush or anything. Grindr was
less absorbing.

There was a flicker of movement in the corner of his eye and he glanced over. Not Daisy, or
Yulya or Lise, just some businessman checking him out. Closet-case. Brian rolled his eyes. He
could have pity on a closet-case. Christ knew he’d taken long enough to come to terms with his
own bisexuality, and was still trying to figure out what parts of himself were real and what parts
were performance, or if maybe there wasn’t as much difference between the two as he’d always
thought. But the guy was holding onto his beer like it was a life raft he couldn’t quite climb back
aboard, and sharks were circling.

Brian clicked off his phone and felt around in his pockets for a smoke. Maybe he’d go outside and
wait, check in. He looked up, feeling that faint hint of something on the edge of his senses again,
and slowly scanned the bar, trying not to be too obvious about it. It was still light outside, and the
door opened, letting in a bright flash and temporarily blinding him. When his eyes cleared, he
froze.

There was no way. Just.

No way.

##

The shock was like a blow to Dom’s head, it was that sharp and unexpected. Everything else in
his mind was gone, nothing left but the man in front of him, leaning against the bar with a pack of
cigarettes in his hand. A tight blue v-neck t-shirt clung to his abs and fitted jeans showed off the
muscle in his thighs. He looked… healthy. Successful. Like a well-fed, well-trained dog on a
leash. Dom, on the other hand, felt like he was underwater and his feet were encased in concrete.
Appropriate, for a mob town, he thought, shocked into absurdity. Then: It’s a mob town. That…
made a certain kind of sense. It made sense that he would walk into a random bar on the Las
Vegas Strip after three years of barren silence and find him there.

The door opened behind him and a group of people elbowed past, jolting him back into his skin.
He grit his teeth, feeling his shoulders swell with—rage. He’d call it rage. Striding forward, he
was up in Brian’s space before he thought about it, not touching him but somehow pinning him to
the bar anyway.

Brian’s face flickered through a cascade of expressions. He was as surprised as Dom was. Dom
could feel a growl building up in his throat, but before it ripped loose Brian glanced over Dom’s
shoulder into the depths of the restaurant and started talking in a low, serious voice. “Dom, Dom,
Dominic, I know you want to pulverize me right now but I need you to stop and seriously
evaluate how badly you want me to be dragged out to a deserted parking lot and shot in the back
of the head, OK? Because if you freak out right here, right now, that is what will happen. They
will literally murder me.”
Dom felt his face twisting into what was probably a sneer. He couldn’t identify the feeling behind it: it was more a pressure than an emotion, a crushing sense of impending explosion. Somehow, miraculously, his voice was steady and barely more than a whisper when he said, "LAPD not enough for you? You thought you oughta get in with the Las Vegas PD too? Or you working for an agency—ATF, ICE?"

"No—I’m not—" Brian hissed. "Look, let me just—I’ll extricate myself and we can go someplace that doesn’t have Bratva eating dinner a few yards away, and you can punch me in the face. I won’t stop—" he broke off. "Shit."

Dom followed his gaze to see a pair of women entering the bar. One was a bird-boned Southeast Asian woman with flat-ironed hair and enough makeup on to change the entire shape of her face. Her companion was dressed similarly in a tight purple minidress with gold earrings brushing her bare shoulders, but was blond and taller. They didn’t look particularly threatening to him.

"Shit." Brian said again, and then his whole posture changed. It was subtle but creepy, like seeing someone be possessed by a ghost. Brian shifted his weight to one hip. His limbs got looser and more graceful; he draped. "Play along, okay? I mean, just don’t say anything, and I’ll get us out of this as fast as possible."

Dom glared at him, but… Bratva. Brian had a point. He could admit it even as he was still reeling from three years’ worth of shock and fury. And Brian would know how to get them out of whatever this was. He stepped back, mouth clamped closed, arms crossed tightly across his chest, holding that awful pressure in check.

"Daisy!" Brain took a step forward and clasped the Asian woman’s arms, air-kissing at both her cheeks. "You’re actually on time for once!"

There was something really obvious about his mannerisms, but it took Dom the length of a whole exchange of greetings between Brian and the women—greetings and boring exclamations about how Daisy wasn’t actually on time, she was half an hour late, which was better than usual but still—to figure it out. Brian was playing gay. He was undercover as some Real Housewife’s gay bff.

Dom almost laughed out loud when he realized, it was so ridiculous. This whole thing was ridiculous. Brian, of all people, in this bar just as Dom walked in. And on top of that, Brian playing some prissy twink… He couldn’t believe it. The Brian he remembered wouldn’t humiliate himself like that for a job—but then the Brian he remembered had been lying every second. Dom swallowed down a bark of hysterical laughter and shook his head.

"And who’s this?" The blond woman looked Dom up and down with a frankly predatory gaze. "Did you manage to pick someone up while you were waiting for us?"

Brian faltered, anxiety flickering over his face when he looked at Dom, like he thought—who knew what he thought. Dom obviously didn’t know him at all. "This is… an old friend. We just ran into each other, it’s the craziest thing."

That was probably the single most suggestive thing Brian could have said, Dom thought irritably. Brian knew it, too, even as he was saying it. Dom could hear the slight wince in his voice. Half Dom’s irritation was at Brian’s anxiety—it was like he was worried Dom couldn’t, or wouldn’t, help talk their way out of this.

"Hi," Dom said, letting his voice sit in the rumbly bottom of his vocal register, the better to charm these women. He held out his hand. "I’m Dominic. Brian and I used to work together." There, that was better.

"Wait a second." Daisy shook his hand, but narrowed her eyes at him. "Dominic? Like, the Dominic?"

"Nooo, no," Brian held up his hands. "Different guy."

"No." Daisy shook her head, overruling his protests. "I’m pretty sure this is that Dominic. I’m Daisy, by the way."

"That’ Dominic?" Dom tried to hide his own wince; he was pretty sure he didn’t want to know.

"The ex Brian talks about all the time," the blond woman helpfully supplied. Dom couldn’t look at Brian—he wasn’t sure if he’d bust out laughing or punch the guy. "I’m Marla."

"Nice to meet you," Dom said, at the same time that Brian burst out, "He’s really not—we’re just, uh, friends."

"Yeah right," Daisy laughed. "If you say so."

A thought struck Dom in the gut: maybe Brian was fucking up because he could barely make himself claim Dom as a friend. He was fucking up, and some cop snobbery that meant he didn’t want to be associated with a convict would explain why. If the pressure in Dom’s head got any worse, his skull was going to start ballooning outward.

Marla linked her arm through Brian’s; Dom risked a glance at Brian’s face and caught an expression that was, he was pretty sure, very well-masked horror. "We’re going to karaoke, I don’t know if Brian told you. You should come!"
“That is the best idea,” Daisy said. She smiled slyly, suddenly looking like a cat on the stalk.
“You’ve got to come out with us, so you can catch up with Brian. We’re not going to the Piranha, so you won’t have to fight off the guy Brian made out with the last couple times we were there.”

“Oh my god,” Brian groaned.
Dom blinked at both of them, off-balance. Brian made out with guys at clubs for the sake of the hike of hiscover?


Dom didn’t answer. Too much shock in too short a time. His stomach was churning.

“Of course he’s coming,” Marla said, linking her other arm through Dom’s. “He’s a gay in Vegas! What else is there to do?”

Dom bit his tongue and let himself be dragged, glaring razorblades through Brian’s back as they traipped out of the bar and onto the crowded Strip. The fury was boiling under his skin, making it hard to think, and if he didn’t get a chance to shake an explanation out of Brian soon he might actually explode.

Dom wanted to drag Brian away and corner him, but Brian seemed unable to tell the women no. There was no choice but to grit his teeth and go along. After a short ride in a black Escalade driven by a silent man who was definitely Bratva, and a couple of stops to collect another pair of women on the way, they washed up in a tiny karaoke joint. It was tucked away behind a strip mall, a couple streets away from the glamour. A local spot, he guessed, which was a small bit of good luck. If nothing else, he’d succeeded in getting away from Mia and Letty and Jacinto for an evening.

He’d been hoping, when Daisy mentioned karaoke, for a Japanese-style karaoke den, with separate rooms for privacy. But this was an open bar, crowded with people. Including, he noted, a pair of fat middle-aged women with crewcuts holding hands and gazing into each other’s eyes right there, a couple of yards from the door where everyone could see them. A few feet away, a group of hairless young men in very tight t-shirts and short shorts were twerking on the tiny dance floor. So, gay bar then, in spite of the lack of rainbow flags or disco balls.

Daisy and her friends swarmed the bar, leaving him and Brian behind for a second.

“Look, just let me convince Daisy that I’m not ditching her because I’m upset with her or anything, and we’ll go,” Brian assured him.

Dom raised his eyebrows. “We?”

“I mean, uh, if you want? I was serious about letting you punch me, man, it’s—I know—” Brian’s voice dropped; Dom could barely hear it over the thumping bassline. He had to watch Brian’s mouth carefully, seeing more than hearing, “I know I deserve a punch to the face.”

Dom stared at him, racking his brain for a response. He was almost over that initial shock of seeing Brian, and was moving on to being furious at the role Brian was playing, and the fact that he was even still a cop at all, and the fact that he was still a lying piece of shit cop who pretended to be friends with his marks to get under their skin.

He and Mia and the others had speculated once or twice about what happened to Brian. In all honesty, the others had probably speculated a lot more when Dom wasn’t around. He wasn’t proud of how fucked up he’d been about the whole thing, those first few months. It had felt like such a betrayal that he hadn’t wanted to talk about it, hadn’t wanted to examine how much of that disastrous last job, the feud with Tran, was actually his own fault.

That fist he’d put through Johnny’s face at Race Wars—he thought about that sometimes. If he could take one thing back, if he had swallowed his own goddamn pride and just turned around and gone to find Jesse… if they’d had Jesse for the last job, Vince would never have gotten hurt. If he hadn’t pissed off Tran…

Letty and Leon were both certain Brian would get very fired once his bosses figured out what he’d done. There hadn’t been anything in the news, though. Not about the hijackings, not anything. There were felony theft warrants out on Dom and Letty—but not Leon, which he’d been outraged about when Mia called down to Mexico to relay the info she’d wrung out of the LAPD clerk. And Vince was never charged; when they discharged him from the hospital, they told him he was a person of interest in the case, but then didn’t follow up and didn’t follow up. Brian must have really cleaned up after himself somehow if he was still working as an undercover cop three years later. Dom clenched his jaw.

Brian shook his head slightly, searching Dom’s face; Dom had been quiet too long. Dom opened his mouth just as Daisy and the rest of her gang descended, lurid drinks in cocktail glasses in their hands.

“Brian, come sing with me!” one of them shouted, right in Brian’s ear.

He winced, stole her cocktail and downed it in one long drink, then handed Dom the glass. “Get
me something decent to get the taste of that out of my mouth, will you?” He asked, grinning.
Flirting. He spun away into the crowd before Dom could formulate a response.

Gritting his teeth against the swell of red-hot fury—Brian just would not stop lying to him—Dom swiveled back to the bar as Brian’s friends—his marks—followed Brian over to the karaoke sign-up, all but one. She leaned right into Dom’s space, shouting to be heard over the music. “So you’re Domini?”

He hadn’t caught her name—she was one of the ones who’d joined them in the lobby of one of the casinos they’d gone past. She was tall and blond, like the other one, with a strangely generic face. Dom couldn’t figure out if it was her makeup or if she’d had surgery done. He stalled, buying a couple of Coronas and shooting her glances. She was looking at him strangely, crowding him a little in the noisy bar but in a strangely platonic way.

Because she thought he was a faggot.

And he couldn’t correct her without making things dangerous for Brian. Great. Like he needed another thing to be pissed about.

“I didn’t catch your name,” he finally said.

“Yulya. And you’re Brian’s Dominic.”

If he had to play along, he might as well make an effort. What would he say if Brian were a chick? “Brian’s Dominic? He talks about me?”

Yulya laughed. “Brian hates talking about himself, but sometimes, yeah. He mentions you.” She laughed again, incongruous with her next words. “Talks about how you and he were only together for a little while, and then you had to leave. Daisy and I thought maybe you’d been sent up.”

Dom stopped. It irritated him to say that he’d been in prison, like his hard-won freedom was nothing. And he wasn’t sure what Brian had been saying—lying, obviously, he was such a fucking liar. Probably he’d made up something out of thin air and just randomly attached Dom’s name to it. And now Dom had to be careful not to fuck up that house of cards.

Yulya took his hesitation as confirmation and laughed again, leaning into him conspiratorially. Her laugh was creepy, Dom decided, without any genuine humor at all in it. “My Anton doesn’t like to talk about prison either. But you’re back now! And here to sweep him off his feet.”

“I don’t—” Dom stopped. He was going to punch Brian in the face, for leaving him stuck in this conversation. “How long have you known Brian?”

“Oh, ages,” Yulya said. “Daisy and he have been best friends for months now. She was so happy to meet him. All of us were so jealous! We all wish we had a gay best friend.”

Dom shook his head and took a long drink of his beer. This was really not how he’d envisioned his night going when he’d stomped out of the suite at the Mirage in search of enough alcohol to make him forget why he was in Vegas.

##

The line finally moved forward and Brian escaped after letting Marla sign him up to sing. He didn’t catch the song she picked. It didn’t matter; the karaoke didn’t start for another half an hour, and he hoped to be able to get out of here before the dance floor even cleared. Daisy let him go with barely a protest, winking slyly at him. He tried to keep the smile on his face and his bones loose and easy, winding his way through the crowd, but it was an effort.

Dom. Fuck. The sheer fact of him, there in the flesh, made Brian feel like he couldn’t breathe. And he hadn’t planned to get his ass kicked tonight. Maybe he could talk Dom out of it—Dom was playing along so far, anyway. Not getting someone murdered was about as basic as it could be, but it was a place to start.

He slid around a group of guys—one of them grabbed his ass as he passed and he ignored it—and came out a few feet away from the bar. Yulya was yelling in Dom’s ear, but when she saw Brian she straightened up and beckoned him over.

“Your man here thinks you drink beer,” she said once he was in hearing distance.

Brian blinked at her. Did she suspect—? “You know me, I’m easy,” he said, pushing away his emotions and falling into the persona. He took the beer from Dom, who was looking a little out of his element. Well, two stools down a couple of guys were making out like they might jerk each other off right there. Brian was surprised Dom was willing to tolerate this as long as he had. He tilted his head back and took a long drink.

“Sometimes I think he might have had reasons for drinking my beer other than a taste for lager,” Dom rumbled.

Brian choked. What the fuck—

Yulya laughed. “I wouldn’t blame him.”

Brian glared at Dom, wiping beer off his chin. Was he laughing at him? “Hey, Yulya, would you
“Brian!” Daisy threw her arms around him from behind and he spun, nearly elbowing her. She teetered on her stilettoes, laughing. “Brian, don’t be a loser. You’ve got to sing!”

“I don’t—” he looked at Dom, trying to figure out a way to tell Daisy they were taking off without making it sound like—

“I know you want to take Dominic off to do filthy things with him, but you promised you’d sing with me!”

Without making it sound like that.

Daisy pouted at him. Brian pried her hands off his arm, mind racing. Right now she was joking, but that pout could turn poisonous if he defied her, he’d seen it. He wanted to get Dom away from Daisy and her friends as quickly as possible, but if he pissed Daisy off it could take weeks to get her to forgive him, and the party was on Wednesday, just days away now. He needed to stay in Daisy’s good graces. His feelings about Dom didn’t matter. “I’ll sing with you some other time, girl,” he protested, keeping his voice light.

“Come on, just a couple songs,” Daisy wheedled.

Brian glanced at Dom, who looked back impassively. Right. No help there.

“Dom, do you sing? You don’t have to go off somewhere to get Brian to do filthy things. If we steal a booth in the back he’ll do filthy things right here. But I’m sure you know that! You’ve probably had more experience with that than we have.” Yulya was—Brian wasn’t sure if she wanted to see Dom storm off in irritation or if she was genuinely trying to get him and Dom to make out. The narrowness of Dom’s eyes warned Brian not to play along with her.

“Alright, two songs, Daisy. Two. And Yulya, you leave Dom alone. Unlike some people, he’s not a slut.”

He finished his beer and let Daisy drag them all off to a booth at the back of the bar, hoping Dom would be fine by himself while he entertained Daisy. Hoping desperately he wouldn’t disappear before Brian had a chance to apologize.

##

Yulya perched on the bench seat next to him, playing with the straw in her cocktail. Dom leaned back in the booth, feigning casualness. Brian and his friends danced only a few feet away on the tiny dance floor. The DJ was mediocre, but they looked like they were having fun. It was strangely non-sexual—he was used to people grinding on each other as soon as they got on the dance floor. That was, in his experience, the whole point of clubbing. But even when they did hang on each other, they were always laughing as they did it, just goofing off. That must be part of the reason why these women liked going to gay clubs, why they were so interested in having a gay friend.

It made him uncomfortable, he wouldn’t lie to himself—not the gay part, but the way they treated Brian like he was one of them. Brian wasn’t a walk-on on Real Mob Housewives of Las Vegas.

Although he did a pretty good imitation of one. Dom watched as a sweaty man with the kind of muscles you got when you had a boring office job and then tried to compensate by spending hours on weight machines started dancing up on Brian. He expected Brian to evade him. He was certainly graceful enough. The three years since Dom had seen him had been good to Brian, it looked like. He’d outgrown his coltish awkwardness and moved like—

Dom cut the thought off. Brian wasn’t evading the sweaty guy. Instead he danced back into him, looking over his shoulder and tilting his head. The sweaty guy put his hands on Brian’s hips and Dom had to look away, swallowing down the sourness in his throat. Brian’s bosses should be ashamed of themselves, making someone go undercover in a scene like this.

Yulya had gone out to the dance floor with Daisy and the rest, but now another one of the group of women—there were more of them now, they kept appearing—slipped up next to Dom. “Not dancing?” she asked, her heavy Russian accent at odds with her Asian features.

Dom shook his head, his eyes drifting back out to the dance floor.

She laughed and he glanced over at her. Her body language was so strange, he thought. Then: she’s not even trying to flirt with me. Or maybe she was, but it was like the dancing. Just playing. She was laughing at him, not meanly, but not biting her lip or lowering her lashes. She was just being friendly.

This whole evening was bizarre.

#

The craziness continued when he and Brian finally escaped from the bar, after Brian was dragged into singing with Daisy and then Yulya and then pushed up there to sing by himself: “I Want It That Way,” which he butchered terribly.

They walked in silence for a couple of blocks, Dom’s shoulder blades itching in spite of the warm desert evening. Finally they turned into a covered parking garage. Brian led him through rows of
cars and then shuffled to a stop in front of a cherry-red Mazda Miata convertible.

Dom let out a bark of disbelieving laughter. "This is your car?"

"Shut the fuck up," Brian said. "It fits the whole..." he waved his hand.

"This is certainly the gayest car I've seen in a long time," Dom agreed, a little meanly. Then, "What year is she, '95?"

"Hell yeah." Brian grinned. "And she might not look like much, but wait till you see under the hood."

Dom raised his eyebrows.

"Got a V8 under there. Come on," Brian tossed his chin. "Let's go for a drive."

Dom folded his arms. "I want an explanation."

Brian darted a quick look around the deserted garage. "Not here."

"Why the fuck not?"

Brian darted a glance over Dom's shoulder, up high enough that he must be clocking a security camera. "Look, I'll explain, just. Come on."
The little Miata did handle nicely, Dom had to admit. And he could hear by the deep purr of the engine that Brian had put work into her, better work than he’d done with that first flashy, expensive car he’d shown up in, back in the day. God, that thing had been amateur hour. And Brian hadn’t been much of a racer, either. If it wasn’t for that cool charisma of his, that grin that dared you not to like him, Dom would’ve chewed him up and spat him out like he had so many other boys playing at racecars.

They’d both been such fucking idiots back then.

Brian tried to keep up a stream of chatter as they left the city about the difficulties of wedging a V8 engine into the Miata and the alterations to the fuel injection system he’d had to make to compensate. Dom grunted responses, and eventually Brian shut up and drove. The neon lights of the strip flashed over Brian’s face, and then the yellow of streetlights and headlights. Then they were out of the city, pulling off the interstate onto a narrower state highway that was populated with fewer and fewer cars as they drove higher into the mountains around Las Vegas.

Dom took the chance to really look at Brian. In the quiet dark of the car, he couldn’t see much, but somehow that felt more honest. Honest—the one thing Brian had never been.

That thought had fucked him up pretty bad, back when he was first in Mexico. But now it seemed almost distant. He was angry, sure. But looking at Brian like this, he had to admit that there had been times when he knew he’d seen the real Brian: when he drove. He drove the way he danced, Dom thought. That looseness in his limbs, that ease—when he had a wheel under his hands it stopped looking like a lie. As the road got steeper, he shifted gears as smooth as silk. The way he handled the wheel was nothing but joy.

Finally, Brian tapped on the brakes and pulled off the road. Dom got out, stretching his legs, glad to have some space. His head was all turned around.

He looked around. They were parked in a simple turnout off the highway, overlooking Las Vegas. From this distance the lights of the city looked like a carousel, like a festival. Like the Strip was really as glamorous as it claimed to be. The day’s heat had almost dissipated, leaving the air cool, and a bright moon shone down on them, casting sharp shadows. He knew the night air was quiet, but the static in his ears was too loud for him to hear the silence.

Dom crossed his arms over his chest and stood with his back to the car, looking out. Behind him, Brian’s door closed and Brian’s feet crunched on the gravel. He stopped just behind Dom, but Dom refused to turn around. The pressure was back in his head, rumbling back into him like a sound just barely too low to hear coming up on him, rattling his bones.

“Well?” Dom forced out. “No Bratva out here, are there?”

“No.”

Dom let the silence hang, waiting.

Finally, Brian said, “Are you going to hit me or not?”

“You think I should hit you?” The tension in Dom’s head was threatening to crack him wide open.

“Dom…” the bravado was missing from Brian’s voice. It was enough to make Dom turn around. Brian stood with his hands at his side, an unhappy smile twisting his face.

“You betrayed me. You betrayed my family.” Dom clenched his jaw. “Maybe I should hit you.” He wanted to. He wanted to put his hands on Brian, shove him, shake him until that cool façade slipped.

“So do it!” Brian flung his arms wide. “Just hit me, man, and get it over with! That’s why I brought you up here, so you could express yourself without Isay and his goons figuring everything out and shooting me. Cause I gotta say, getting shot by the Bratva is not on my agenda for tonight.”

“Speaking of the Bratva. Why are you fucking around with organized crime in Las Vegas, Officer O’Conner?”

Brian shrugged expressively, mulishly rebellious. “That’s not me anymore, man. I’m not a cop.”

“ Heard that one before.”

“It’s true. After everything in LA, they took my badge. The FBI guy who was running the hijacking case, he wanted to charge me with obstruction of justice, aiding and abetting the escape of a violent felon. He had a whole list. But you know the LAPD, they don’t like to look bad in public, and charging me would have meant media, a trial. Juries don’t like to convict cops, not of anything. So they leaned on me to resign, and. You know, fuck them anyway.”

“But you’re undercover here.”

Brian shifted his weight. “It’s complicated.”
“Un-complicate it.” Dom leaned his weight back against the car, all his muscles still on high alert as he watched Brian pace.

Brian waved his hands as he explained: how he’d taken off across the country and eventually washed up in Miami, how the FBI found him there and coerced him into helping them. How he and his friend Roman had taken down a drug lord—Brian snirked when he described jumping his car into a yacht. Dom wasn’t sure how seriously he should take him. Who did that kind of thing? But Brian was reckless as shit. If there was anyone who would actually attempt a stupid stunt like that in real life, it was him.

After they took down the drug lord, they walked away with a certain amount of cash. “You know, I never thought I’d see the day when a hundred k wasn’t enough, but then I bought a sweet little BMW M3 and the second month I had it, after I’d put like twenty k into it, Rome rolled it, completely smashed it up, and broke his damn shoulder. Medical bills, man.”

“So, what, you thought you’d pull a repeat? Work with the cops or whoever, come away with more cash?” Dom ran his tongue over his teeth like that could get the bad taste out of his mouth.

Brian looked away. “Not exactly. My friend Kumiko has this computer program, this—it’s like a virus I guess, I don’t know—that gets into a business’s billing or payment system and siphons off a few cents on every transaction. It fucks with the calculation of taxes or whatever, so the customer is paying a few cents more than the business collects, and that gets shuttled away to us. So little that no one notices it, but it adds up to a ton of money when done over millions of transactions. It works best in banks, of course, but any place that has a large number of small transactions is a good mark.

“Long story short, now we’re in Vegas ripping off the Bratva.”

Dom stared at him. “They own a casino?” he guessed.

Brian laughed. “Parking garages, actually. They have, like, two dozen of them. And a couple of strip clubs, a laundromat. They use all of them to launder money, of course.”

“Parking garages? So the Bratva has security camera footage of me driving off with you?”

“They won’t know to look at it. And if they did—” Brian shrugged.

Dom shifted his weight against the car, re-crossing his arms. High-tech theft he could get behind, and he couldn’t judge Brian for taking the risk of robbing the mob, not with what he’d been up to himself. But this scheme still didn’t add up. “Exactly what part of this needed your girl sending you in undercover as some pretty little twink?”

Brian coughed incredulously. “OK, first of all, Kumiko is not ‘my girl,’ she’s my friend, and she didn’t ‘send me in’ anywhere. This was the best plan—we need physical access to Isay Mozhayev’s laptop, which means access to his office or his house. Daisy is pretty conscientious about who she invites over, but we figured out that she throws these parties for her inner circle. There’s no way Kumiko could get in—she’s not married to a Bratva. So I volunteered.”

“You volunteered to, to dance all up on dudes? That’s sick, man.”

“Yeah, fuck you.” Brian spit it out like he meant it.

Dom looked up. This sounded like a fucking minefield. “What?”

Brian’s eyes glittered in the low light. “I’m not pretending to be gay. I’m not lying to Daisy. I’m just not telling her the whole truth.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dom’s voice was ironed flat by the weight of everything he was keeping contained. Rage wasn’t a strong enough word. His jaw hurt but he couldn’t unclench his teeth.

“I’m not gay, but I’m not straight either,” Brian said defiantly. “I’m bi. I like women too but it’s not like it’s a problem to dance with hot guys. Or kiss them. Or fuck them.”

“You’re a fag.”

“Fuck you.” Now he just sounded tired.

Dom couldn’t look at Brian, he was so furious. The sky came down to meet the mountains on the horizon in a jagged line: spangled stars and pitch black. He could not believe Brian had the fucking nerve to try to sell him this bullshit. He wasn’t lying? Like fuck he wasn’t lying. He was lying to Daisy just like he’d lied to Mia, just like he’d lied to Dom. Because he was a fucking liar.

Dom hauled air in through his nose. It wasn’t like he didn’t know this already. He thought he’d actually gotten over the betrayal. He thought—and now to find Brian prancing around acting gay, making up an ex-boyfriend and attaching Dom’s name to the lie.

Although at least that was a sign that Brian’s lies weren’t made up out of nothing. He took people he’d known and things he’d done, and changed them around to make up convincing cover stories. At least those lies had some kind of truth in them, names he could remember.

At least he’d remembered Dom’s name.
It shouldn’t make him feel better to think that Brian hadn’t been left completely unaffected by the weeks he’d spent tearing up Dom’s life, but stupidly it did.

Dom let out his breath and then took another, gathering his thoughts. Brian probably thought he was a complete homophobe now. “Sorry. I should know better. The place I have down in Mexico, my neighbor is Zapotec, she’s a, what-do-you-call-them. A muxe, you know, a ladyboy or whatever. So. It’s fine. I just didn’t know that you were.”

Brian made a tiny gesture, dismissive. Dom grit his teeth. It wasn’t fine. It bothered him, the image of Brian on the dancefloor, a strange man’s hands on his hips. Much less any of the dozen other images his brain instantly flashed at him: Brian being pushed roughly against a wall, Brian on his knees. It felt sickening, like—like the smell of prison disinfectant, stuck in the back of his throat. But whatever. It wasn’t his place to say anything.

“So are you going to freak out on me?” Brian’s voice was calm and closed-off.

Dom wished they were having this conversation in the light. “I just said I was sorry, asshole, what more do you want?”

“I mean it, if you’re going to out me to the Bratva, at least let me warn Roman and Kumiko. You got no beef with them, right? I know you, you’re not a cold-blooded killer. You don’t want Kumiko to get a bullet to the skull.”

Dom tightened his arms over his chest. A breeze ruffled the air on his forearms, almost making him shiver. “You really think I hate you that much?” he asked slowly. “You really think I’d sell you out to the mob?”

“I got no idea, man. Snitches get stitches, right?”

“You betrayed me,” Dom said, the righteous anger rumbling and rolling in his chest. “You betrayed Mia. I haven’t forgotten that you lied to us.” That hung in the air, making the cool desert night thick and muggy with hurt. “But I also haven’t forgotten that you gave me your keys.”

“Yeah?” Dom couldn’t see clearly enough, but from the tone of his voice Brian was grinning at him, that smile of his that was like the sun. He could feel it shining on his skin; the muscles in his forearms bunched as he suppressed another shiver.

“Wait,” he said, swallowing down his weird reaction and changing the subject. “So if you’re not with the cops but you’re under cover, who’s your backup? Your friend, what’s his name?”

“Roman.” Brian leaned up against the car next to him. “Nah, he’s trying another angle. Got a job as a driver and bodyguard for this other Bratva, Orlov. It made more sense than having him wait around to try and bust in if I somehow got myself in trouble. This way between the two of us, we’ll get a good opportunity eventually without taking any huge risks.”

Dom snorted. “No huge risks, that sounds like you.”

“Fuck you,” Brian said again, but this time it sounded cheerful.

“You’re the one who decided to infiltrate the Bratva without any backup.”

“It’s just a lot of clubbing. Daisy and her friends are almost always drunk or high on something. And I—I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but we should be finished soon. Less than a week.”

Dom made an interrogative noise.

“Daisy’s having a birthday party at her house. I’ll slip away from the drunk housewives for a minute, find her husband’s laptop, bam.”

“All by yourself.”

Dom felt more than saw Brian shrug one shoulder. The pressure revved up in his head again and he heard himself saying, “That’s it. I’m coming with you.”

Brian could feel his mind cycling without catching on anything. He was like 60% sure he’d heard Dom wrong. Dom moved restlessly, shifting his weight against the car beside him. It called attention to Dom’s magnetic physicality—not that he’d ever been able to shut it completely from his mind but sometimes it hit him. It didn’t make it any easier to think of what to say.

“What?” he finally croaked.

“This isn’t complicated. I’m going to join you.”

“Uh. As—you realize that Daisy is going to think—”

“Think what?”

Brian swallowed. This did not make sense coming from the guy who’d just called him a fag. “She’s going to think that you and I are, are hooking up. She already thinks you’re my ex-boyfriend. And, like, you don’t know Daisy, but she’s not going to suddenly lose interest in watching me make out with you. That doesn’t bother you?”
Dom grunted. “It’s a job. I’m not an amateur, Bri.”

Brian was struck by a thought. “Why are you in Vegas, anyway? What are you even doing in the US?”

Dom laughed bitterly. “Letty’s getting married.” To someone who wasn’t him, obviously. “And you’re here for it?”

“She’s family.”

“Still,” Brian silently cursed himself for not bringing Dom someplace with better lighting. There was space up here and it was isolated, perfect for not being interrupted or overheard, but right now he really wanted to be able to see Dom’s expression.

“In the south,” Dom offered, “In Mexico, Letty has cousins. A lot of cousins. They sent her off to stay with their second cousins in Cuba until the heat died down. She met Jacinto there. Barquin. He’s not a bad guy. Teaches sixth grade.”

“You didn’t go with her.”

“Nope.”

“So that’s why you were out drinking by yourself,” Brian guessed after a pause.

Dom grunted. “I wouldn’t mind having a job to do right about now.”

Brian considered. It was a terrible idea. If Dom realized how Brian felt about him, how instrumental he’d been in forcing Brian to acknowledge that he liked men… he’d been prepared for Dom to give him a black eye. But he could admit, if only inside his own head, that a bruised face wasn’t the biggest risk he was running here. His feelings for Dom had never really gone away, and even after three years, seeing the man in person was bringing that intensity roaring back. It was difficult enough, knowing he couldn’t reach out and touch Dom’s hand. If he had permission to touch, but not permission to feel anything, it might actually destroy him.

But knowing that didn’t mean he could make himself say no. Brian chewed on the inside of his lip. “Rome isn’t going to be thrilled about this.”

“So if Kumiko isn’t your girl,” Dom asked in the Miata on the way back down to the city, his voice carefully nonchalant, “is this Roman guy your, uh, tu novio? Your boy?”

“What?” Brian laughed and then felt bad for laughing. Dom was clearly trying to make up for his earlier knee-jerk reaction. “No, no, Rome is… we were best friends when we were kids, and then I joined LAPD and he—he went up for GTA. Three years in Chino. We’re friends again, obviously, but uh. Anyway, he’s straight.”

Dom grunted. Brian glanced over. Dom was looking out the window at the city lights. God, he’s beautiful, Brian thought, then immediately pushed the thought away. This was never going to work if he didn’t keep himself under better control. He looked back at the road, biting his tongue through the late-night side streets of residential Las Vegas until they finally pulled up at the townhouse.

Brian’s townhouse was boring as shit, beige in a row of beige. Inside it was just as predictable. Good for running a con, Dom supposed. It looked exactly like a place a bunch of working class twenty-somethings might go in on. Nothing to give them away, and no doubt none of their neighbors knew each other, all commuting to jobs on the Strip and then coming home to watch television.

Only one light was on, in the kitchen. Brian cracked open the fridge. “Want a beer? All we have is… Alaskan IPA or Bud Light.”

Neither sounded appealing, but when Brian held up a bottle of Bud Light, he took it. “So where are these partners of yours?”

“Brian!” A tiny Japanese woman shuffled into the kitchen. She wore leggings and a giant pink sweater, which seemed ridiculous given that it was still at least 70 degrees outside even in the early morning dark. But it was cold in the house. She spotted Dom and sighed. “Brian, I’ve asked you and asked you to text me before you bring people back here.” She turned to Dom. “He’s got terrible slut etiquette, but I’m trying to train him.”

Dom made himself smirk like he wasn’t still on his back foot. “Slut etiquette?”

“Kumiko!” Brian interrupted her. “This is Dominic. Dominic Toretto. We ran into each other when I was out with Daisy.”

The woman’s eyes got big with surprise and possibly delight. Her voice certainly sounded delighted when she said, “The Dominic? You’re kidding me!”

“Does everyone who knows you know my name?” Dom asked, torn between amusement and
irritation. For a guy who kept his own secrets so close to the vest, Brian certainly felt comfortable sharing things about other people.

“Basically,” Kumiko answered for him. “You’re not just the one who got away, you’re the one he helped escape from federal custody so you could get away.”

Dom raised his eyebrows. That was not a spin on the story that he’d expected to hear. She made it sound like Brian had had a thing for him, back in LA.

“It’s not like that,” Brian protested. “Do not start this drama, Kumiko.”

Dom was saved from finding out what it was really like—he was pretty sure he didn’t want to hear any more on the subject—by the arrival of a dark-skinned man, as physically imposing as Dom was himself. He felt himself standing up straighter instinctively when the guy walked in the front door, already complaining.

“I swear to God, if Orlov asks me one more time to explain to him why ‘the blacks’ do this or that, I’m a shoot him. Straight up shoot that white-supremacist motherfucker. You know what he wanted to know today? Wanted to know why ‘the blacks’ like fried chicken. Like there anybody on this goddamn planet don’t like fried chicken.

“Oh.” He caught sight of Dom as he swung a briefcase up onto the counter, and stopped short.

“Brian, I thought you promised Kumiko you were gonna—”

“Yeah, yeah, text you, got it, I know.” Brian waved an impatient hand. “Rome, this isn’t— This is Dominic Toretto. Dom, Roman Pearce.”

Dom ticked his chin up instead of offering his hand.

“Brian? Why is Dominic Toretto in my kitchen?” Roman asked slowly. He didn’t sound thrilled about the situation.

“Uh, we ran into each other when I was out with Daisy. I told him what’s up and he offered to give us a hand. Daisy got this idea in her head that he and I used to date—”

Roman snorted. “Yeah, wonder where she got that idea,” he muttered.

“—and it makes sense to use that. Bring Dom in as my, like, ‘boyfriend,’ to the party this week.”

Roman looked around the kitchen. His face looked like he’d just bitten down on a lime. “Brian, can I talk to you for a minute?”

He dragged Brian out of the kitchen into the darkened room beyond. Dom could hear him hissing angrily. He couldn’t blame him, really. No one would appreciate his teammate springing a fourth partner on them in a job like this. He turned to Kumiko and forced a smile. “Brian tells me you’re the mastermind.”

Kumiko shrugged.

“He didn’t mention how you three decided to target the Bratva.”

Kumiko tilted her head back and forth. Her bangs fell into her eyes and she swiped them back; she didn’t look like a felon, but then there was no reason she should, he supposed. She was a techie or something—she looked like a college student. “Mm. You think we’re too ambitious?”

It was Dom’s turn to shrug.

“I had a run-in with Bratva a few years back. The son of the vor here in Las Vegas, he shot my friend just to put pressure on her husband. Held her husband at gunpoint while my friend bled out on their kitchen floor, wouldn’t even let him hold her hand.” Her smile was completely at odds with her words. She looked like she should be drinking hot cocoa to go with her giant sweater, talking dreamily about—about setting up a poetry reading for her artist collective, or whatever pretty nerd girls did in college.

“I want to hurt him back, so I thought I’d take the thing his family values more than anything: their money. And this way we’re gone for weeks, maybe months, before they figure out that anyone is stealing from them.”

Kumiko had probably killed people, Dom thought. Or would someday, if she hadn’t yet. Not that he could judge. He had nearly killed Kenny Linder, had run Nguyen off the road, and it wasn’t like Baja’s beaches had reformed him. Still. It made him wonder who Brian had become in the years since he’d seen him. He’d never actually known Brian, not really—he’d known a lie, one designed to make him open up his home, his family. It only felt like he knew him. He had to remember that.

“Brian brings people back here even though this is your headquarters?” That bothered him. It wasn’t safe.

“Brian brings men back sometimes, yeah. He likes people, likes to party. And it’s good for his cover.”

Dom shifted his weight. “I’m not gay.”
Kumiko blinked at him. “OK.”

This was incredibly awkward. Dom searched wildly for a way to change the subject. He flexed his hand around the bottle of beer, wishing he was better prepared for any of this. “So you’re a hacker, right?”

Kumiko bit her thumbnail. “I hack a little. I’m not nearly as good as the friend who gave me the program we’re using, but I know enough to be dangerous.”

She smiled, and Dom throttled the urge to take a step away from her. He was only feeling awkward, he lied to himself. He certainly wasn’t wondering if her day job involved assassination.

“I do play a lot of video games,” Kumiko admitted, and suddenly Dom wondered if he’d been misreading her the whole time. “Do you ever play League of Legends?”

Brian expected Rome to read him the riot act for bringing in Dom unilaterally, and when they made it around the corner and down the hall, Rome didn’t surprise him.

“You stupidmotherfucker, you’re going to wreck yourself. Smash on the fucking rocks and then who’s going to have to clean you up off the pavement? Me, that’s who. Dominic fucking Toretto, are you serious.”

“What? He’s solid, man. No one better to have on our side.”

“That is not what I’m talking about. You stupid fucker.”

Brian narrowed his eyes. “What are you talking about, then?”

Rome lowered his voice. “The crush you have on that man that is bigger than the goddamn sun, that’s what.”

“I don’t—”

“The fuck you don’t. ‘Rome, he really made an impression on me.’ ‘Rome, something about the way he drives is just so cool.’ ‘Rome, I think I’m bisexual.’”

“That’s not fair,” Brian protested, his face hot.

“I don’t give a fuck about fair. You asshole.” Rome shook his head. “You are in love with that man, don’t pretend like you ain’t.”

“What the fuck, Rome,” Brian hissed, glancing back toward the kitchen. “I thought he was going to punch my teeth in when I came out to him, you can’t let him hear you spout that bullshit.”

“You came out to him? Tonight?”

Brian shrugged. “Yeah, I mean. Daisy and the girls were at the bar where I ran into him. So I sort of had to explain once I had a chance.”

“And he, what, tries to punch you?”

“No, he, uh. He called me a faggot, but then offered to help with the job.”

“He what.” Rome had been running out of steam, but now his voice escalated again.

Brian shushed him. Rome could get too dramatic about that kind of thing. He was pretty sure that right after he’d come out, Rome had gotten into a fistfight at Tej’s garage with one of the gearhead customers, defending Brian’s faggot honor. Or something. Brian had been off getting wasted and refusing to fuck anyone at the nearest gay club and had heard three different versions of the story from Tej and Suki and Jimmy. It hadn’t been his best month. “It’s fine, he apologized, Jesus.”

“Whatever.” Rome shook his head. “Bringing him in as your fake boyfriend, that is the worst idea I’ve ever heard.”

“Well.” Brian squinted down at the floor, then looked up at Rome through his lashes, faux-flirting. “Forgive me for being an idiot?”

Rome cuffed his ear affectionately. “Every day, you know I do.”

“So he’s in?”

“Bit late to be asking me that, but yeah. Whatever. He’s a goddamn superhero, the way you talk about him, so I guess he’s fucking in.”

Brian grinned at Rome. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me. You better go save your boy from Kumiko, you know she eatin’ him alive.”

Brian nodded and turned back up the hallway, hurrying when he heard Kumiko ask, “So, Dominic, are you seeing anyone?”

“Her boyfriend is Inagawa-kai yakuza,” he said, hurriedly rounding the corner. “And he’s getting
out—" he broke off at the sight of Kumiko’s wickedly smiling face. “Um. Anyway. Not relevant. Let’s, uh, let’s go over the plan.”
Las Vegas never really stopped buzzing, not the center of the city, but at three a.m., driving back after dropping Dom at his hotel, the streets were quiet enough that driving was nearly meditation. Brian was exhausted—he’d started the day working a shift at his cover job, coming in before noon to open behind the bar and sling drinks through happy hour, then got off at eight and pretty much gone straight to meet Daisy. It wasn’t abnormal for him to work around the clock; usually he built up energy from it, from flirting and joking with people. Even customers, even fat-bellied tourists from Missouri who laughed too loudly and called him “young man” but barely fucking tipped. But seeing Dom again had taken everything he had, every reserve of energy.

The man was just so overwhelming. He’d forgotten, a little. Actually, he realized as he walked up the steps to the townhouse, he hadn’t forgotten at all. He paused with his keys out, leaning his forehead on the door jam. It wasn’t that he’d forgotten a thing about Dom, because he hadn’t. But there was a difference between remembering Dom’s voice and actually hearing it shiver through his bones. And Brian was so, so fucked because that difference—that was everything. And now that he’d had a taste of it again, he didn’t know how he was going to give it up.

Rome was sleeping already when he got inside. Kumiko waved at him but didn’t look up from her laptop at the kitchen table. It was just as well; he didn’t want to hear all the shit Rome was bound to give him about this, not right now. Brian dragged himself into his tiny bedroom and locked the door behind him. He didn’t bother to turn on the light, just stripped off his shirt and jeans and flopped onto the bed. It wasn’t much—his cover meant he had to look like a twenty-something wage-slave drifting through Las Vegas, which wasn’t all that far from the truth. The best cover stories were 99% true, and his room suited him: box spring directly on the floor, mattress with cheap jersey sheets and a single fluffy blanket. Kumiko liked to keep the air conditioning on but he didn’t mind the chill.

Brian lay flat on his back and looked up toward the darkened ceiling. He still couldn’t believe it. Dom. Maybe he’d wake up and it would prove to be a dream. Maybe…but no, he still had that shiver in him, that breath-catching feeling that hadn’t left since he’d recognized Dom’s face in the bar.

Christ. He didn’t deserve to get this lucky. No one deserved a second chance like this. He could see it: Dom would work with him on this job and it would go well. They’d make off with bank accounts full of cash and there would be nowhere they needed to be. Dom would smirk at him and challenge him to—to some kind of race, some kind of contest, but it would be down in Mexico and so he’d have to go away with Dom and it would just sort of—they would be friends, this time for real, no lying, no faking. And maybe Dom would never return his feelings but it almost didn’t matter, not if he would still race Brian, and drink his beer, and—

Brian covered his eyes with one hand. It was stupid of him to let himself think that way, even for a second. Dom was here for his own reasons, he wasn’t here for Brian, and when he was done he’d leave again. Which was fine. It was totally fine. He’d been fine for years, for his whole fucking life before he met Dom, so.

His hand slid down his face and dropped to the bunched up sheet. It was just because he was so tired, he told himself. Any other day, he’d be happy about seeing Dom again. Honestly, he’d probably be jerking off, one of his well-used fantasies about running into Dom: Dom’s face hard and furious, his fists twisting in Brian’s hair, forcing him to his knees. “You want forgiveness?” His voice quiet and threatening, powerful. “You can fucking earn it.” Brian unbunching Dom’s fly with shaking hands, licking and sucking Dom hard, until his cock was sliding hotly against the roof of Brian’s mouth—

It was a good fantasy. Normally it would have Brian coming so hard his whole body shook. But actually seeing Dom face to face made it so obvious just how fantastical that fantasy was. Dom was straight; he didn’t want Brian; their relationship was business. Just business.

Brian rubbed his hand over his face and rolled over, pulling the covers over himself. He was better than this weepy bullshit. He just needed sleep.

Brian slid a couple of empty glasses off the corner of the bar, still exhausted. It was almost forty-five minutes before happy hour started, and the afternoon crowd was starting to filter in. Still pretty dead, though. A year ago when he’d started bartending in between real jobs, bullshitting his way into a job at the Twist with zero bartending experience, he wouldn’t have been rushing around prepping. Now, he washed the glasses and started cutting up lime wedges he probably wouldn’t need, just to pass the time.

There was a part of him that didn’t quite believe Dom had actually appeared, without warning, in his life. He’d been wishing for it for so long he’d almost forgotten that he was wishing. It just felt normal, that crazy missing. Like a dry drunk. But now Dom was here, in the city—they were working together again. He felt so many things about that he couldn’t untangle them to figure out what they were.

A noise across the bar snagged his attention. It wasn’t loud, but it was unusual enough to draw him out of his thoughts: a shuffle of feet, a squeaking sole against the smooth floor. He did his best to look like he wasn’t watching, of course. This was a Bratva bar; that was why he’d applied here—he’d wanted to get in with the Bratva somehow. And they’d hired him, in spite of his lack of
credentials, precisely because his background looked a little shady. He’d covered up his previous employment, of course, but not his record, and not bothered to fill the gaps in his employment with anything, so it looked like he was a petty criminal. On paper he looked like the kind of guy who genuinely might end up working for the mob.

In one of the booths, a couple of men in black jackets and jeans sat on either side of a third man. He was skinnier, Hispanic, in a t-shirt and denim jacket. Brian had seen him a couple of times before, and thought he was probably just a guy—just a construction worker, probably, or a maintenance guy. Probably worked nights if the hours he came by the bar were any indication. Spoke with a Spanish accent when ordering cheap American beer.

The Bratva guys in black were leaning in on him, threateningly. Brian had to look away to pull a beer, and when he looked back, the third man was stiffly sliding out of the booth, one of the Bratva standing solidly only a few inches from the table while the other followed the guy, scooting along behind him.

They were bracketing him in, fairly obviously. Brian kept his face tucked down, like he was watching his hands as he stacked glasses behind the bar, but he watched their reflection in the mirror on the wall behind the bar. As they turned and walked toward the back entrance—Hispanic guy in the middle, one of the Bratva holding onto his arm above the elbow—he spotted the strap of a shoulder holster peeking out from the edge of one of the Bratva’s coat.

The look on their victim’s face made him grit his teeth. He’d like to help the guy if he could, but it wasn’t like he was armed or had time to figure anything out. They were probably only going to bruise him up a little, anyway, remind him that borrowing money from the mob was a bad life decision.

Probably. If he told himself that until the end of his shift, he’d probably be able to sleep at night. He wasn’t a cop anymore, anyway. And his stupid idealism hadn’t done him any good even when he had been on the right side of the law.

After a few minutes, one of the Bratva came back inside, strolled up to the bar and sat down. He ticked his chin up at Brian. “An IPA,” he said, barely paying attention as Brian pulled the beer and slid it across the bar. He didn’t pay, and didn’t seem to notice that he’d neglected to.

Brian slid his tongue across the front of his teeth but didn’t say anything. Most of the Bratva who drank here paid a little at least, but Titus, the manager, didn’t make them. The guy was rude but there was nothing Brian could do about it.

The guy fished his cell out of the voluminous pocket of his canvas jacket and Brian tried to look like he wasn’t eavesdropping. He stepped down to the other end of the bar, where the sink was set into the wall, and ran the water over the two glasses waiting to be cleaned. The Bratva guy tapped at his phone, and then made a call. Brian turned the water off, swiping at a glass with a soapy sponge, and listened.

“Alexei.” A pause. “Da, da. He will get the insurance.” Then something in Russian. The guy sounded bored. He paused and listened for a while, spinning a coaster on the bar in front of him like he was low-key irritated. “Da.” He hung up.

That wasn’t very informative. As the guy put his cell back in his pocket, the movement of his jacket flashed the pistol in his shoulder holster at Brian. It was just a gun, nothing special. The guy wasn’t trying to intimidate Brian or anything, either; he barely seemed to see that Brian was there. But still. Brian was going to be glad when this job was over. He was sick of these gnarled men who felt old and crabby even when they were young, who would shoot someone with the same lack of emotion they would express over scrubbing dirt from under their rough fingernails. He missed Miami. He missed jobs where the main threat to his life came from driving too fast, not from snake-cold gangsters with guns. Cars, at least, were fun.

God, Dom would be glorious in Miami. All that humid heat, all that sun on his skin. Brian could imagine him lounging around someplace like Tej’s shop in a thin t-shirt stuck to his chest with sweat. Could imagine going dancing with him late in the evening, when the breeze off the water made the air bearable. Dom wouldn’t go to the club with him, of course, that was too gay. But Brian could imagine him at a salsa club, or dancing cumbia.

“Hey,” the Bratva said, snapping Brian back to harsh reality with a literal snap of his fingers. “Tell Titus to call the vor, okay?”

“Sure thing.” Brian smiled politely.

The Bratva tapped his fingers hard on the bartop twice, in thanks, and left, his empty glass of beer still sweating where he’d left it. Brian didn’t bother getting annoyed at the lack of a tip, just wiped the condensation off the bar, put the glass in the sink, and left a sticky note for Titus stuck to the cash register. He was getting into this whole service-industry shtick. There was something sort of fatalistic about serving the public for tips. He didn’t like it, but he could see how a person could get used to it, could forget to dream of something bigger.

It was a good thing he was getting out in a matter of days. He liked himself better when he wasn’t adjusting to being a peon. It would be good to run off into the sunset with a wad of cash and a fast car and Rome.

Even better if you can convince Dom to come with you, a little voice in the back of his head said. It would be impossible. He didn’t even really know what Dom was doing here, let alone what
kind of job might entice him to leave his exile and work with Brian. It would have to be outside the US, probably—which would be okay. He and Rome could go anywhere: Mexico City, Tokyo, Seoul, wherever. Dom was planning to go back to Mexico after Letty’s wedding, he was pretty sure. Maybe he and Rome could find a job down there. A cool one, something flashy and fast.

Brian bit his lip. It was stupid to think about, but fuck. Dom was here, in the same city. He had Dom’s phone number. Dom had insisted on working with him. It was kind of stupid not to think about it.

Straight straight straight, he’s straight you fucking moron. The litany ran through his head but it didn’t blank out the spooling fantasy of working with Dom again, of being on his team, of being the one he grinned at with that wild light in his eyes when they pulled up to the starting line.

After a solid eight hours of sleep, Dom woke up feeling strange. Lighter, without all that rage and hurt he’d held so tightly for the past three years. Like a white room full of sunlight. The floor-to-ceiling windows in his hotel room, looking out high over the city, might have had something to do with it.

The feeling didn’t last much longer than his first cup of hotel coffee. Dom was starting to think about going to find Mia when his cell started buzzing on the dresser. First Mia, then Letty, then Leon, then Jacinto’s sister. When Jacinto’s mother called him and started shouting at him in Spanish he conceded defeat and went off to ferry her around as she tracked down the priest.

This wedding was supposed to be tiny and low-key and easy. It was in Vegas for Christ’s sake. Nevada was a central gathering point for their team and for Jacinto’s siblings, all six of them. Two of Jacinto’s brothers lived in Cuba, but three of the others were permanent residents in California. His one sister who didn’t have papers lived here in Nevada, and it made sense not to make her risk traveling too far along highways infested with Border Patrol. But Jacinto’s family was religious and it turned out that putting together a proper wedding in just a few days wasn’t easy, even in Vegas.

Letty had asked her cousin Cara and Mia to be her bridesmaids, and Jacinto’s brothers were standing up for him. Technically, Dom and Leon and Vince were free of official wedding duties. They could even wear whatever they wanted—although somehow between Mia and Letty all of Dom’s clothes had been picked out for him before he could protest. And he found himself running errands anyway: picking up tuxes from the tailor, running around to the dry cleaner to retrieve dresses that had been packed in suitcases, buying flowers. He spent all afternoon finding a florist who could provide the right flower arrangements on such short notice, and then Letty dragged him to dinner, just the two of them.

“Scared, Toretto?” she asked him, mocking him like she used to when they were teenagers.

“Of Jacinto? Never."

“I meant of me,” she said.

“Never,” Dom repeated. She had a point—it hadn’t been that dramatic, when she’d left. He’d done his absolute best to make sure the team didn’t splinter apart over it, and he’d succeeded. But he hadn’t spent a lot of time alone with her, either.

Now he leaned back in the booth and really looked at her. She had been so much of his life, and she still loved her, but not in a jealous way, not possessively like he had. She had her own life, would have her own home, and if he was still hoping that that home would be right next door to his…it hurt, a sweet tight ache in his gut, that she wanted so much more than that. But she wasn’t leaving entirely, and it was turning out not to destroy him. And maybe he would still convince Jacinto to move to Baja full time, abandon the apartment in Havana and live in Letty’s house on the beach.

Over steaks, they talked about the old days, the old neighborhood and all the petty little trouble they’d gotten into as teenagers, and it was good, but then Mia and Cara showed up and it got exhausting. Dom was happy to throw Letty a wedding, would do the same for any of his people, but that didn’t mean he enjoyed the minutiae of it. All Mia and Cara wanted to talk about was the work they’d been doing all day. Dinner turned into drinks with Leon and Vince and Jacinto and then all of Jacinto’s sisters and brothers and all their spouses and children. There were a lot of them, and a lot of people meant a lot of opinions, a lot of noise even if the shouting was good natured.

A little after midnight, he found himself beside the pool at the Mirage, with Mia. He’d acquired a bottle of rum. Mia had something pink with an umbrella in it, and they sat drinking on lounge chairs under the matte sky, stars invisible behind the light pollution.

“You alright?” Mia asked. “You’ve been distracted.”

“Mmm.” Dom swirled his glass. Rum, neat, wasn’t usually his drink, but this was alright. “Vegas is a weird place.”

“Yeah. Everything is so… constructed. It’s like staying inside a movie set. That’s not what’s bothering you, though.”
“No?” He raised his eyebrows at her.

“Nope.”

“Alright, when did you turn psychic?”

“Come on, like you’re hard to read.” Mia laughed. “Something is bothering you, something more than the fake volcano out front.”

Dom considered, watching the one swimmer out late doing laps in the pool. He could tell her something about the wedding, about his expanding vision of family or regrets about not making it work with Letty. Something about change and growth and loss—it would be enough to satisfy her, and would be at least partially true. This was a weird week before he ran into Brian, which was why he’d been out walking the Strip by himself in the first place. But this was Mia: she deserved to know, would figure it out sooner or later.

“I was in a bar yesterday and I ran into Brian,” he said.

“Brian? Brian, cop Brian?” Mia turned her whole torso to stare at him in astonishment.

“Yes, cop Brian. What other Brian would I be talking about?”

“Well I don’t know why you’d be talking about him!”

“He’s not a cop anymore.”

Mia sat back. “I guess that doesn’t surprise me.”

“They almost put him in prison,” Dom said. “For helping me get away.”

“Almost?”

“Apparently it would be too embarrassing for the LAPD to put one of their officers on trial.”

“And you didn’t think I’d want to know that? It took you an entire day to tell me this!”

Dom scowled. “There was no time to talk today.”

“You could have made time! Jesus Christ, Dom.”

“Lo siento.”

Mia shook her head, but fell quiet. Stillness stretched around them: the tiny slaps of water moving in the pool, the city noises blocked by the height of the hotel.

“Brian’s bisexual,” he said abruptly. “He was dancing with some guy, acting all—I don’t know.”

“Oh my god.” Mia was… laughing. That was not the reaction he’d expected. He’d expected her to be angry, feel twice-duped. “Oh my god, that’s hilarious. I bet you freaked out.”

“I did not!” Dom protested. “I was surprised, that’s all.”

“Mmhm.” Mia sounded smug. “Sure you were.”

“Aren’t you?”

She shook her head. “What, freaked out? No. I’m not all hyped up and macho, you know? I mean, I wouldn’t mind seeing Brian dancing with another hot guy.”

“…What.”

“I know for a fact that you’ve watched girls dancing together. In fact some of the things I have heard about you…”

“What have you heard?”

“That you and Jessica Rivera and her friend Carmen—”

“Hey, hey, hey.” Dom held up his hand. “You’re my sister, you’re not supposed to know about that.”

Mia rolled her eyes. “I’m just saying, you think women don’t ever like to look at two guys together? It’s the same thing. Besides, it’s not really surprising, you know?”

Dom looked at her questioningly, but Mia just pressed her lips together, half smiling, and refused to say anything more.

He ended up telling her all about the heist and about Brian’s friends, although of course he didn’t name names. Mia knew how it worked by now; since leaving LA, he and Leon and Letty had pulled a few robberies, mostly highway truck-jackings. The right drivers could make good money skimming off the profits of drug exporters or petro-barons; it was almost like a public service, and it kept their cars shiny and new. They’d learned a thing or two from LA, too, and were better these days about keeping anonymous, painting the cars inconspicuous colors, speaking about details only when they could be totally certain no one would overhear, and making sure to hit roads hours away from their own homes.
“It’s reckless,” he said. “Brian is a risk-taker, but his crew seems just as bad. The fucking Bratva.”

“Mm.”

“So, I’m helping him.”

Mia sighed. “Right, Brian is the risk-taker. I’m not going after the Bratva for vengeance after they kill you.”

Dom shifted uncomfortably. “It’ll be fine.”

“You just finished telling me how risky it is.”

“For one person alone.”

Mia shook her head. “He could see the wheels turning. “You don’t owe him, you know. He was a cop the whole time, just because he didn’t chase you down in the end doesn’t mean…”

“That’s not how it is.”

She looked at him for a long second, mouth flat, eyebrows raised. They’d both gotten that expression from their mother. It made him feel pinned to the spot, just like their mom’s eyebrows had.

“Mia,” he growled. He didn’t have anything else to say, though. She was right, he should walk away. Didn’t change the fact that he really couldn’t.

She shook her head, keeping her opinion to herself. Maybe she was growing immune to his shit. Three years out from under his shadow had been good for her, even if he really didn’t want to admit it at the moment. Dom would bet he could still out-stubborn her, though.

“Just be careful. This is supposed to be a fucking vacation, not some fucked up mobster battle.”

Dom grunted. “You mean weddings aren’t supposed to feel like wars?”

“Ha,” she said dryly. “You’re hilarious.”

“I am,” he agreed, taking a drink straight from the bottle. The rum was sweet enough to make his teeth ache.

“But seriously,” Mia said. “You should tell Brian to stop by before the wedding. I’m sure the whole crew would want to see him again.”

“Yeah, right.”

“OK, so they wouldn’t. But I want a chance to tell him not to get you shot, OK?”

Dom nodded. Deciding it was safe to change the subject, he asked, “Heard from Samson yet?”

Samson was the doctor Mia had been dating off and on for the past few months. Dom had never met the guy—his practice was in LA, and Dom hadn’t been back to the city since he drove off in that orange Supra. But he knew Mia was waiting for a call from him. She’d been checking her phone since they all met up in Vegas two days ago.

“No.” She picked at her fingernails. “He hasn’t even texted me in four days. I think it’s over.”

“I’m sorry.” He paused. “You want me to break his arms?”

“No. Thanks.”

Dom narrowed his eyes at her. She looked unhappy. “You sure?”

“Yeah. Hey, Dominic. I’m going to tell you something but you have to promise not to freak out, OK?”

“Mia.”

“Prométeme.”

Dom crossed his arms, but she didn’t relent. “Fine. I promise not to freak out—more than is warranted.”

She took a deep breath. “I’m pregnant.”

Dom sat up straight, filling his lungs. “OK, I am going to break that bastard’s arms. Or maybe his legs.”

“Christ, Dom, you just promised not to freak out.”

Dom glared at her. “If you expect me to not get angry when you tell me you’ve been knocked up by some asshole who can’t even pick up a phone—”

“Yeah, well. Turns out I continue to have shitty taste in men.” She laughed self-deprecatingly. “I mean it, though, I don’t need you to defend me. It’s not like he got me pregnant when I wasn’t
Dom made a mental note to check again the first time she got a bill from the doctor’s office. Or maybe just pay this Samson a visit without telling her.

“I’ve been trying to decide if I’m going to get an abortion,” Mia said quietly. Dom searched her face. “Mom would have a fit that I’m even considering it.”

It was true—their mother, dark and Mexican and very Catholic, would have shouted and broken plates at the idea. She’d have driven Mia to the clinic too, though, or at least he thought so. Even she did pray the rosary the whole way.

“You know I’ll support you whatever you decide,” Dom said.

“You better,” Mia said tartly. “After all the hell you’ve put me through.”

He grinned at her. “If you have a kid, I’ll knock over a liquor store to pay for diapers.”

“Dios mío.”

He laughed. “Come here.” He held out his arms and she tipped herself out of her own lounge chair into his for a hug.

After Mia went inside, Dom sat and watched the faint ripples in the empty pool. A baby—he would have to convince Mia to move down to Baja if she decided to keep it. He didn’t like the idea of her trying to manage alone without him to at least run errands when she needed an extra pair of hands. Family was the important thing—but he didn’t know if she’d see it that way. She wouldn’t want to give up her college enrollment, but the statute of limitations on the LA truck hijackings had three more years left on it, and if she had a baby she’d have to take time off anyway, probably.

A vision of a tiny little copy of Mia, hair in pink barrettes, darted before his eyes. A girl would be good, tiny and cute, someone to spoil. He could see himself pulling presents out of the trunk of a car, Mia groaning as the kid shrieked with joy. They could name her after their mom.

A kid was a scary prospect, too. Even apart from having a kid without the kid’s dad around, which had to be giving Mia pause, the world wasn’t kind to little brown girls, and Samson was darker-skinned than Mia was. Wasn’t kind to little brown boys, either. He pushed that thought away. Seeing Brian again, bringing up all that ancient bullshit, had him feeling a little bruised. But it was fine. If she had a kid, he would protect them. That was all. Whatever he had to do. He’d make sure they never stepped foot inside anyplace like Lompoc.

Brian got the early shift again on Sunday, open to dinner. The tips were lower, so Rachel hadn’t argued when he wanted to swap it out, and he needed the night off so he could bring Dom into Daisy’s social circle. He wished he could just quit, but that was an amateur move, disappearing from work just days before the heist went off. And he was determined to get the program on Isy’s computer at Daisy’s party. Just three more days, and he’d gotten them off work legitimately, switched his shifts around. Rachel and Titus were going to be pissed when he didn’t show up to cover the shifts he’d promised later in the week, but hopefully he’d be calling in sick from a highway out of the state if not the country.

So it was going to be his last shift, but the bar ticked along obliviously. He cut lemons and limes, prepped the mint leaves for the inevitable mojitos, arranged the mixers the way he liked them. People wandered in and out, drinking late lunches or taking mid-afternoon breaks in shopping or gambling. The Strip was timeless, in a way, but a happy hour special was a happy hour special.

He rang up a group of old women who wanted their bill split in a complicated way, and when he turned back to the bar Mia was sitting there. She smiled at him coolly. Brian found that he wasn’t surprised at all to see her. The cold wash down his spine wasn’t surprise; he glanced around the bar, checking for Bratva.

“Hey, Mia.” He smiled at her, as cool as she was, and leaned over the bar casually, trying to cover his pounding heart. She was as pretty as she’d ever been. Prettier maybe; she’d put on a few pounds and it made her look sturdier, harder to break. “This isn’t really a good place to talk. I’ve got a break in half an hour when my co-worker comes in—can I get you a drink on me for now? And then we’ll go for a walk once I get a break?”

Mia clenched her jaw and narrowed her eyes at him, not bothering to pretend she didn’t hate him. But Dom must have told her about the situation when he told her that Brian was in town—she grit her teeth and said, “Sure. Why don’t you get me a mint and soda.”

Brian cocked his head. “You sure? I make a mean mojito.”

“Yep.” She didn’t look charmed.

Brian shrugged and whipped up the soda with mint, adding a tiny squeeze of lime and garnishing it with a thin slice of cucumber. It was less about his professional pride than it was about trying to make Mia soften toward him—but it was his last day as a bartender, and making basic non-alcoholic drinks was boring.
Mia rolled her eyes when he presented her with the drink, which he counted as a win.

The minutes ticked by excruciatingly slowly. The bar wasn’t busy enough to keep him from looking around at her every thirty seconds. It looked like she was feeling the wait, too. By the time Rachel came in, tying a basic black apron around her waist as she joined him behind the bar, Mia had shredded two napkins to fluff.

Brian felt like he was bolting out of the building, but he wasn’t. He was careful to look casual, just in case someone was watching. He wasn’t going to fuck up the job just because Mia was drilling holes through his chest with her angry dark eyes.

He got her down the street and into the cool bliss of the off-brand casino on the corner, and he sat down at a slot machine before he realized he didn’t have any change on him.

Mia folded her arms and leaned against the side of the slot machine like she was bored, but he could read the impatience on her.

“Alright, hit me,” he said. “Uh, not literally, we’ll get kicked out.”

“Yes, thanks, I do know how behave in public places.” Mia’s voice was cold.

Brian winced. “Sorry, I mean—that’s as good a place to start as any, right? I owe you the biggest apology.”

Mia huffed out a sigh. “I have spent the last three years trying to decide what, exactly, I’m most angry about.”

Brian squared his shoulders, bracing himself.

“I mean, you lied to me. You lied to me a lot, actually, and I’m guessing your job wasn’t making you lie your way into my pants, so, good job being creepy as hell there.”

He ducked his head. He actually hadn’t seen that coming, but it wasn’t like he didn’t deserve it. Christ, he felt like shit, like it was three years ago and he was stuck doing damage control to try to stay out of jail when all he wanted was for someone to flay him for the magnitude of his betrayal. The problem back then had been that everyone was angry with him for betraying the LAPD, and that wasn’t at all what he’d felt guilty about. Still wasn’t.

“You lied to my brother, too. To Jesse. Jesse thought you were friends, you know.”

“I know.” Brian looked up at her. “I know, Mia.”

“And then you just fucking left without saying a goddamn thing, so not only did I lose my idiot brother to that stupid fucking plan of his, not only did I lose Jesse, I lost you too. In the same goddamn day! Comemierda.” Her voice rose, but she strangled it back with an effort until he could barely hear the last word. It didn’t matter; there was nothing he could do to fix any of that.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t talk to you,” he said finally. “At Jesse’s funeral. I wanted to, but it was sketchy enough just being there.”

Mia sighed, her shoulders losing some of their tension. “They were watching you, yeah. I figured that out, believe it or not.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It didn’t take a fucking genius, not after they didn’t even have a warrant for Leon, and then they didn’t charge Vince because they didn’t have any evidence.”

Brian shrugged. Keeping his mouth shut had benefitted him. It wasn’t like he’d been sacrificing anything by stonewalling the investigators at that point. He didn’t do it for Leon. He certainly didn’t do it for Vince, that asshole. “The investigation is still open, you know. Dom can’t come back.”

“You were trying to make it all disappear, though.”

Brian shrugged one shoulder.

“Now, see, that is it. That is exactly it.”

“What do you—”

“I can’t decide if I want to shoot you or kiss you!” Mia threw up her hands. “You’re a liar and a creep but you’re also the luckiest break my family has gotten in… in ever, basically.”

“I wasn’t trying to be a creep.” Brian looked at her, willing her to believe him. “I really—I genuinely liked you. I wasn’t lying.”

“Mhm.”

“I wasn’t! I thought—you were the coolest girl I’d met in—”

“Just apologize and let it be, asshole.” He thought Mia might almost be smiling. “It’s been three years, don’t even think I’m not completely over you.”
“I’m really sorry. I treated you like shit, and I’m really sorry.”

“It took me like a week,” Mia said. She was definitely almost smiling. “The guy I dated after you was a lawyer, actually. With much nicer hair.”

Brian ducked his head again. His heart felt so full he might puke, but it was better than he’d felt at the beginning of this conversation.

“And he spoke Spanish without a shitty American accent.”

“That’s—good for you,” he said, meaning it. “I hope he was good to you. Is?”

“Was.” She shrugged. “The guy I’m dating now is a doctor.”

He snorted a laugh. “You deserve the best.”

“I do deserve the best,” she agreed. “My brother does, too.”

“What?” He blinked at her. She wasn’t implying—

“Thanks for saving Dom’s ass, I mean. In L.A.”

Oh. “Oh. Yeah.”

“If you get him killed now with your current bullshit, I really will shoot you.” Mia grinned sharply.

Brian grinned back. “I’d let you, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said, like it meant something. Brian bit his lip. Dom must’ve told her everything, right? Or maybe he didn’t. Maybe he thought Mia would freak out if she knew the guy she’d dated was queer now. Should he tell her?

An elderly woman elbowed her way along the row of slot machines past them, and the moment passed.

“Anyway, that’s all I came here to say,” Mia said, straightening. “Thank you, and you’re an asshole, and you better be careful.”

“It’s good to see you again,” Brian said, keeping his tone light so it wouldn’t sound weighted with meaning.

“Mmhmm. I’m sure we’ll be seeing more of each other.”
Chapter 5

The front of the Mirage was a mess even on a Sunday evening—hectic, crowded, full of bright lights designed to lure people further into the casino. Dom scowled at the people getting into and out of taxis or handing their keys over to valets. Lot of people driving boring rented cars with perfect paintjobs and automatic transmissions. He’d opted to wait for Brian outside, under the palm trees. It was hot, even at eight p.m., but he was acclimated to the desert heat, and he’d take traffic noise over the stale, air-conditioned smell of casino air any day. He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

He was a little offended that he hadn’t had to even try to explain to anyone else why he’d left early after dinner instead of sticking around to get drunk. It wasn’t any kind of official event—those wouldn’t start until the rehearsal dinner and the bachelor party later in the week—but someone could have objected to his leaving. Maybe Letty had warned them not to give him a hard time? He used to think he ran his crew, that he could tell them what to do and they’d do it, but he was beginning to learn that power ran in many directions.

Another day of wedding prep hadn’t helped his mood any, not with so much history coming back at him. Maybe that was why no one tried to keep him inside. All day, he hadn’t been able to stop thinking about Lompoc. And then when he tried to distract himself he found himself watching Mia for signs of pregnancy. Exhaustion, nausea? He wasn’t sure, exactly. She seemed fine though, just more and more exasperated with him. Fed up, she’d sent him away to drive Jacinto’s mother around in her rented Nissan Altima as punishment.

Neither of them had had to promise to keep each other’s secrets, though. He hadn’t let slip about her situation, even when bickering with her. And she hadn’t told anyone that he’d seen Brian, either. He kept thinking about the way she laughed at him, the way she bit her tongue. Chances were she was just worried about how he was reacting to Brian not being straight. Right? There was no way she thought… he wondered, not for the first time, if she remembered him going into Lompoc as a dumb teenager and then coming out all twisted up, if she had guesses as to why. He’d never told anyone about it but it didn’t take a genius.

Finally Brian’s silly little car darted through the traffic and slid smoothly to a halt in front of him, rescuing him from his brooding. Brian rolled down the window and grinned out at him, so predictably certain of his charm. “Waiting long?”

“Not especially,” Dom drawled, getting into the car. Brian cut into traffic, efficient and unobtrusive. He still drove like a wheelman, Dom thought, but a more experienced one who knew how not to draw the eye of the law even in a cherry-red sports car. He was easy to ride with, engaged with the car in a way that made conversation unnecessary.

When he was forced to stop at a light, Brian said, not looking at him, “We need to practice.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, we need to figure out our body language. It’s not a good idea…” Brian trailed off, thumb tapping the wheel. “I’ve seen people fail to maintain a cover because they were too squeamish to get their boundaries worked out before they went in. Like, this one time, on this basic drug bust, a pair of officers I used to know went in as a couple. But they didn’t even like each other, so they were really hesitant about touching. The guy went to put his arm around his partner and she flinched away from him. The department lost that whole branch of the investigation because the cartel figured out they were being investigated.”

“You think you’re going to put your arm around me and I’m going to flinch?” Dom knew he sounded mocking but couldn’t help himself. “You think I’m scared of you?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Brian snapped.

A flush was starting to creep up the back of his neck into that curly, perfectly blond hair of his. Dom watched it, angry even though he knew it wasn’t Brian’s fault that he kept thinking about CO Ward. About getting cornered. It had been a decade, and it wasn’t Brian’s fault.

“I’m just saying, if we practice it’ll look more natural.”

“I guess you would know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re the expert in deceiving people, Bri.” Dom breathed out through his nose, trying to pump the anger out of his lungs before it took over.

“Oh fuck you. You said we were even.”

Dom bit back his first three instinctive responses. “Aren’t we pretending to be exes, anyway?”

“Yeah, but. You don’t know Daisy. She pushes.”

“You let a hundred pound woman push you around? Maybe you’re the one I don’t really know.”

The silence dragged out. Dom looked at Brian’s face, which he’d been avoiding; he looked genuinely hurt. Finally, Brian said, “You insisted on joining me. If you don’t think you can trust
me, maybe it’s better if you just… go. Do your thing. Pretend you never saw me.”

Dom clenched his jaw. Like he would just—walk away. Let Brian dwindle in his rear view again. “Not happening.”

“So, what then?” Brian made a helpless gesture.

Dom looked out the window. They were driving through the off-Strip wastes, budget motels and dingy lounges scattered between the necessities of life: grocery stores, gas stations. The lack of neon made it obvious just how close the desert was to swallowing the city and burying it under sand.

“Tell me something true,” he said.

“What?”

Dom could feel Brian looking at him for longer than was safe to look away from the road, but he kept his own gaze out the window. “Something about yourself. Something true.”

Brian was silent long enough that Dom started to think that he would refuse. The thought hurt like pressing on a deep bruise. Then he said, “Alright. Um. When I was little, we lived in this trailer in a park in Barstow.”

“Not Arizona.”

“No.” He faltered. “Anyway, we didn’t have a yard and my mom said I couldn’t have a dog, but our neighbors had these fat little chihuahuas that they let wander around. When I was seven, I kidnapped one and kept her in my room for, like, a whole day, until my mom got off work and discovered her and made me give her back.” Brian grinned. “I named her Race Car.”

“Race Car?” Dom laughed.

“Hey, man, I was seven!”

“Alright.”

“Let’s see… Okay, when I was fourteen I knocked over a convenience store with a couple of these older kids I knew. I wanted to impress this girl, and her brother had a toy gun that he painted to look real.”

Dom made a face. “A convenience store?”

“Whatever, I didn’t plan it. If I had, it would have gone better.” Brian scowled at the road. “We got $312, and I got sent to jovie for a year—aggravated robbery. If they hadn’t sealed my record, I would never have been able to become a cop.”

They never would have met. Dom grunted. It was weird to think about that. “That the worst thing you’ve ever done? Robbery without a real gun?”

Brian glanced over. Then, slowly, he said, “I’ve done a lot of fucked up things in my time. But the most fucked up thing… about two months after I got my badge, I was in a patrol car that got called to a domestic. We pull up, this man is screaming so loud you could hear him from the street. ‘I’ll kill you, I’ll kill your baby, I’ll kill your dog.’ The neighbors called it in. Anyway, we go in, cuff the guy, haul him away. The woman he was yelling at had barricaded herself in the bathroom with her one year old son after the guy went after her with a knife.”

“What a charmer.”

“Yeah. Anyway, she was gorgeous, this little Salvadoran woman with hair down to her waist and the biggest dark eyes, and she was—she was obviously undocumented. No ID, couldn’t speak a word of English, all the info we got on her we got from the neighbor, who claimed the guy was pimping her out of their apartment.

“My partner—” Brian paused. “He was one of those guys who will always be a patrol officer, you know? No ambition, not that bright. He got stuck with the new kid. Anyway, he put her in the back of his squad car, told her that if she didn’t give him a free ride he was going to put in the paperwork to deport her. Just her, not her kid.”

Dom looked at Brian’s profile. He was staring straight ahead down the road, his face tight like he was looking at death. Dom felt a little sick. There was a smell invading his nose, layering on the back of his tongue: the concrete-disinfectant smell of prison. He didn’t want to hear the rest of this story, but couldn’t seem to make any words at all pass through his throat.

After a minute, Brian continued. “I didn’t stop him. Didn’t tell her that we weren’t ICE, that we couldn’t deport her. Our shift sergeant told me to drop it, not file a complaint on it, and I didn’t. I just let…

“Later, I figured out that it wasn’t the first time Miller did that to women he was supposed to be helping. I’m pretty sure it wasn’t the last.”

He banked sharply around a corner. Behind them a car honked. “I don’t have nightmares about shooting Tran, but I do about that.”
Dom swallowed hard. Silence filled the car as Brian drove too fast down sparsely populated residential throughways. He wasn’t driving like a wheelman anymore; he was lucky there were no flashing lights behind them.

Dom had no idea where they were going. It was possible that they weren’t even going anywhere, that Brian had wanted to have this conversation while driving just because he liked driving.

He breathed in. Fine. It was fine. Brian was—he remembered taking Brian out to his dad’s garage, telling him about Linder. This conversation was the same, he guessed. And he had asked for something true.

“What do you think we need to practice?” Dom asked.

Brian glanced over, a smile flickering over his face. “Well, we’re trying to establish that you and I used to date and I’m trying to get you back, right? So I need to get used to flirting with you, and you need to get used to not punching me in the face when I lean on your shoulder to talk all quiet in your ear.”

Dom snorted. “Man, I’m Italian, you think that would freak me out?”

Brian raised one eyebrow. “The thought had occurred to me, yeah.”

“We’ll be fine,” Dom said. “Have a little faith.”

Telling Dom about Miller had felt like flaying off his skin. And then once they met up with Daisy and her friends at the bar before they hopped to the club, he had to slide into character. He had to let himself look, let himself smile as wide as he secretly wanted to and crack terrible pickup-line jokes—that felt like peeling off another layer. He was raw, it was excruciating, and it was only going to get worse.

Dom didn’t seem to notice. Even though he’d refused to practice, he played his part with more ease than Brian expected, buying them both drinks and laying claim to a pool table like he honestly didn’t care that it looked like they were on a date. He slid smoothly away from Brian’s tentative attempts to put his hand on his back or elbow or shoulder, but that was normal. In character even. They were supposed to have history, not be together.

Brian made sure to keep the conversation over the game of pool light and easy. He was just glad that Dom was butch enough that he had a good excuse to play pool while Daisy and Lise and Yulya watched and giggled and gossiped. It had been months since he’d played a decent game of pool, and it wasn’t a handshipe to play up being a little swishy as contrast to Dom’s solid masculinity. He was layering stories on stories, and that part felt more real than the pickup lines Dom kept rolling his eyes at.

And anyway he genuinely wanted Dom’s opinion on the exhaust on his Miata: putting a V8 in a car that small was kind of ridiculous, but he and Rome had had some time back when they were planning this heist. That much power with that little weight was a rush on the mountain highways, but it unbalanced every other system in the car, and it was nice getting input from an expert.

He hadn’t expected it to feel natural faking a relationship with Dom, but maybe he should have. They could read each other. Dom hadn’t spent the past three years wishing for a chance to see Brian again because he wanted to get on Brian’s dick, but there was something between them. And Dom had always been able to read him—he hadn’t wanted to believe that Brian was a cop, but Brian had long since recognized that when he’d promised Dom that he wasn’t a cop… well, it hadn’t exactly been true at the time, but he wasn’t a cop anymore, was he? So maybe it was the truest thing he’d ever said. Even playing pool with Dom felt like racing him, that give and take like they were the only two people in the world.

Plus, it wasn’t like it was difficult to let his glances linger. Dom was clearly doing his best to fill the role. Like he’d said, he was a professional. He’d even dressed for the part, in a dark gray v-neck t-shirt that stretched over his shoulders and biceps, and fitted jeans. He was the hottest thing Brian had seen in ages—in three years, if he was being honest—and if Brian had trouble tearing his eyes away… hopefully Dom would just assume he was a great actor.

Brian sank two balls in one shot, leaving one more plus the eight ball. He grinned at Dom and drank the last of his beer. “Loser buys the next round,” he said, bending over to line up his next shot.

Dom smirked and looked over at Daisy. Leaning into Brian’s hip so he was close enough not to be overheard, he said, “If I didn’t think your friends over there would faint, I’d make a joke about how you handle a stick and a pair of balls.”

Brian took the shot and scratched completely. “Christ, Dom.”

Dom laughed and easily sank his own last ball and the eight ball. “Loser buys the next round.”

It was so, so easy to fall into that rapport, like it was something real. Brian stood in line at the bar and reminded himself of that. This was a job. Faking a relationship with Rome would feel the same. He and Dom were, at best, friends.

“Hey man, you want to order?” The bartender leaned into his line of vision and Brian blinked back into focus. He ordered a round of shots and carried them back to their booth. A thrill tumbled
through his stomach when Dom took one shot glass from his hand and their fingers brushed.

*Doing this with Rome wouldn’t feel anything like this.*

The club Daisy dragged them to was Brian’s least favorite in Vegas. Too many tourists. It was well-established as LGBTQ-friendly, which meant that when straight tourists wanted to go to a Gay Club In Vegas, this was where they came. The decorating scheme was heavy on chrome and disco-ball glitter, which he actually liked. It reminded him a little of the Twist, the bar in Miami he’d hung around when he was figuring himself out.

Not that he had himself figured out. He knew what he liked: speed freaks with good bones. Gender was irrelevant. But when it came to what he himself was, he was less clear. Too much time putting on personas left him in awe of the drag queens who shifted in and out of genders like picking a lock. They knew something about changing faces that left him feeling like an amateur. The leather daddies and high femmes who were so certain of their core identities that they’d pick up a broken beer bottle to defend their right to it—they impressed him from the other direction.

He’d learned young, so young he didn’t remember it, that people liked you better if you figured out who they wanted you to be and then pretend to be that person. It was a habit he didn’t know how to break, didn’t even know if he wanted to. He didn’t like the idea of only ever having one story to tell to explain himself any better. You had to be really certain about yourself to make that work and he just wasn’t.

So he’d experimented: cut his hair and painted his nails and bought a mesh shirt and danced until he puked. He’d had fun, and hooked up with some pretty people. All the different ways people expressed themselves didn’t scare him anymore, and he’d gained an aesthetic appreciation for the nuances. But he wasn’t any clearer on how to define himself in a way that felt genuine.

Now, the bears and dykes and fairies felt like going back to the old neighborhood. They were adorable, unlike the tourists; he’d only been in Vegas a few months but he’d been there long enough to wish there were a lot more actual gay people under the disco ball lights and fewer middle-aged straight couples holding hands and looking around wide-eyed because they weren’t in fucking Kansas anymore.

Dom, on the other hand, seemed to think the club was a little much. Joking over pool was apparently close enough to the shit he was used to talking with his friends. But as they walked deeper into the club, the topless dudes grinding up on each other, hands in each other’s back pockets, were more than he was comfortable with. Or at least that was how Brian figured he should interpret Dom’s body language, the slight tension drawing his shoulders toward his spine.

“You alright?” he asked, but Dom just blinked at him.

Then Daisy tackled him from one side and Lise grabbed his arm from the other. “Dominic!” Daisy shouted over the pounding music. “Did you say you were going over to the bar?”

He’d said no such thing, and even if he had, she wouldn’t have been able to hear it. Dom raised an eyebrow at her.

“Well you should, the bartender will definitely pay attention to you! Get me a Cosmo, will you?”

“What, are you saying I’m not pretty enough to elbow my way up to the bar?” Brian protested, laughing at her.

“Should I get you a Cosmo, too?” Dom asked.

He had to lean in close to Brian so they could hear each other, and Brian let himself lean into it so their arms pressed together. Dom was warm and solid and fucking reassuring. Brian wanted to close his eyes and tuck his face into Dom’s neck. Which meant that he probably should not be drinking any more. He’d had three shots of vodka and a beer already. But fuck it. “Sure.”

Dom rolled his eyes at the drink choices and left, cutting through the crowd toward the bar. Brian spotted at least one wandering hand and winced internally.

“He likes you.” Daisy was up in his space, teetering on her heels trying to reach his ear so he could hear her.

“Yeah.” Brian tried to think of what he would say if he was out with Rob, the only guy he’d ever dated longer than a few weeks. “We’re still friends.”

“No, I mean, he wants to fuck you.”

Daisy knew when to be blunt as hell. Brian liked that about her: she was mean, she got shit done. Usually her eyes were sharp, but it was convenient that she was reading Dom wrong now. “I don’t know.”

“You should take him home with you.” Daisy elbowed him. Lise nodded agreement.

Daisy’s elbows were sharp enough to hurt and he mock slapped at her, channeling his own inner queen. “Aren’t you supposed to be warning me off sleeping with my ex? What kind of friend are you?”
“You’re single, you can do what you want and who you want. Live it up! Be free!”

“Mmm.” Daisy was jealous, he knew. Isay wasn’t great in bed; that was the kind of thing you learned about a Bratva avtoritet when you had brunch with his hungover wife on the regular. After being Daisy’s bestie for four months Brian knew a fair amount about the inner workings of the Bratva, but he knew more about Isay’s penis. “Well, Daisy.” He smiled at her faux-casually. “How many people are you having over at your house, for your birthday?”

She narrowed her eyes at him, joke-suspiciously. “You better not be thinking of skipping out on my party to have sex.”

“Who, me? Never. I just want to make sure your party is as fantastic as you are.”

She punched his arm, hard enough that he didn’t have to fake a wince. “You are thinking about skipping out on me! You better not, I will destroy you.”

“Never, honey, never.” Brian glanced toward the bar. Dom was still in line.

“Oh, I see.”

His gaze snapped back to her.

“You want to bring your man along with you. Fine!” Daisy raised a finger. “But he better make out with you where I can see it at least once, or I’ll tell Isay you forgot to buy me a birthday present and he ought to have you killed.”

She was joking; as far as Brian knew, even if she did ask Isay to whack someone for her, Isay would ignore her completely. Not because he’d never had someone killed—but because he didn’t respect his wife’s wishes enough to do what she asked. Maybe better not to risk it, though. He imagined relaying her order to Dom and swallowed hard. His stomach turned over just thinking about it.

Three cocktails later, it was too hot in the club. It was fucking with his head, dancing so close to Dom. He could see the sheen of sweat on Dom’s temple and had to strangle the urge to lick it off. And Lise and Daisy were conspiring to knock him into Dom with every surge of the music. It was too much; when the song changed, Brian took the opportunity to bow out.

“I’m going out for a smoke,” he announced, letting himself press his hand onto Dom’s elbow for balance as he leaned close enough to Daisy to be heard. He didn’t wait for a reply, just slid away through the crowd, mercilessly leaving Dom on the dance floor.

Outside, the air was finally cool. Technically people were allowed to smoke in the club, but Brian was used to the stricter laws in LA. He wasn’t the only one outside smoking, but he walked down a little way, past the club entrance, and leaned into the doorway of a closed shoe repair shop. He lit up a cigarette and stared out into the dark street.

He’d quit smoking right before he went undercover at Harry’s. Tanner had encouraged him to quit—told him he was too talented to die of lung cancer. But when the LAPD had tossed him, he’d started up again. It was comforting, the heat in his lungs. It evened out the pounding of blood in his ears when he felt like he was running too hot, speeding out of control. Which had happened a lot lately; he’d gone through most of a pack in the past three days. Dom made him feel like he was redlining, shaking to pieces like a badly aligned chassis.

It was fine. Dom would be gone back to wherever he came from in a couple days, and Brian could refocus on rolling in Bratva cash somewhere far away. Maybe he’d go to Tokyo. Kumiko knew people there; she’d hook him in with what was good.

A pair of men stumbled past, hanging on each other, hands inching into each other’s waistbands. Brian closed his eyes until they were past him. Better not to let his mind go down that path. Better not to think about Dom—

Another pedestrian stopped under the streetlight to tap a cigarette out of a pack. He fumbled at his pockets for a light, and Brian took pity on him.

“Here, man.” He held out his lighter.

“Thanks.” The man’s smile flashed whitely against his dark skin. He was shorter than Brian, but broader, muscular, his hair cropped short against his head, and he wore a tight white t-shirt that said *Bitch, I’m Madonna* in neon pink and glitter.

“No problem, Madonna.”

“What? Oh.” The man looked down at his shirt and laughed. “Well, you know what they say: dress for the job you want.”

Brian laughed. “Nice work if you can get it.”

“For me, it’s all about who she can get.” The man leaned up against the other side of the doorway, close but not quite touching. “She’s got her pick—”

“Bri?”
Brian turned. Dom was walking down the sidewalk toward him, and he didn’t stop until he was up in Brian’s space.

“These’ll kill you,” he said, and plucked the mostly-ashed cigarette from Brian’s hand and dropped it on the sidewalk.

“If I live long enough for smoking to kill me,” Brian started, turning toward Dom, then stopped. Dom had one arm braced behind Brian’s back, against the wall, and he’d turned into it without meaning to. Dom hadn’t backed off, and from his knees to his scalp Brian’s skin hurt, trying to close that last inch of space. Dom’s presence was intense, the most overwhelming sense of well-being Brian could remember ever feeling. He wanted to fold himself up and sit in Dom’s lap. He wanted—he wanted Dom to comb his fingers through his hair and tell him he was doing well. It was a hunger in every cell.

It was completely inappropriate and if he did anything about it, out here where Daisy wasn’t watching, he would ruin everything.

“I’m just gonna go,” the man said. “Thanks for the light.”

Brian looked up. He’d almost forgotten the guy was there, but Dom hadn’t. He was coolly eyeballing the stranger like some kind of predator staking out his territory.

He’s acting, Brian reminded himself. He’s doing that thing that possessive boyfriends do. It’s an act. The thought ached enough to clear his head. He took a half step away; he could still smell Dom’s aftershave distinctly enough to make him dizzy, but that feeling in his skin like it was wrong not to be touching Dom’s skin eased. Or he told himself that’s what the cooler air was making him feel.

Inappropriate. He looked down at the ground, put his hands in his pockets for lack of anything better to do with them.

Dom looked at Brian, chewing on his lip as he tried to figure out what Brian’s posture meant. He was being careful, had been careful all night not to get too much in Dom’s space. He probably thought Dom couldn’t take too much groping, would have some kind of gay crisis if Brian touched him too much. Dom had done everything short of grab Brian’s hips and dance up on him. It was weird, certainly, and he didn’t like the wandering hands in the club, but probably the weirdest part was how easy it was to touch Brian. He was starting to realize that he trusted Brian—his body trusted Brian.

He could probably actually have sex with Brian without freaking out.

The thought occurred to him and immediately a series of images flashed through his mind: Brian on his knees looking up, mouth open and glistening; Brian pulling his shirt off over his head, toeing off his shoes; Brian asleep, sun falling on his face from an open window like the one in Dom’s bedroom at home.

Brian on his knees with his hands braced on a headboard, muscles in his back flexing as he got fucked by some nameless, faceless stranger. He blinked the images away, unsettled. No. He didn’t want that, not ever. No one should ever put Brian on his knees like that. He was too fucking drunk if he was even thinking it for a second.

Maybe Brian had the right idea, keeping a little bit of separation between them. Dom stepped casually away, crossing his arms over his chest.

Brian looked up and down the street then smiled ruefully. “That was a very convincing rendition of Possessive Boyfriend.”

Right. Acting. “You think Daisy is buying this whole deal?”

“Hell yeah.” Brian smiled brilliantly. “She thinks I’m desperate to get in your pants. You’ve got the right idea, too.”

Dom raised an eyebrow.

“Not breaking character, I mean, just because we’re a little away from Daisy. You never know when one of them might follow us out here. Lise smokes like a chimney.”

Dom hadn’t even thought about it, just reacted. Fuck, he’d told Brian the acting wouldn’t be a problem but his head was not in the right place for a job. He clenched his jaw, trying not to look like he was suddenly freaked out even though he was. “So how much longer do we need to dance?”

Brian shrugged, loose and easy, and was about to say something else when his cell phone began to buzz. He fished it out and looked at the screen, then actually answered the call.

“What? How bad—? …Oh, OK.” He paused, listening. “Back at the house? Yeah, OK, we’ll be there asap.”

Dom raised his eyebrows in question as Brian hung up.

“Rome’s got some big info.”
“And doesn’t want to talk on the phone,” Dom finished. “Are we bugging out?”

Brian shook his head. “Nah. Not actually an emergency, just. I’ma go tell Daisy that my
roommate locked himself out and I need to go rescue him.”

Dom nodded and followed after Brian back toward the crowded club. Brian was beautiful, of
course, you couldn’t meet him and not know that. But he hadn’t spent a lot of time thinking about
how Brian must look to other gay dudes. His hair was cut a little shorter than he’d worn it in LA,
but still with enough length to curl. It made him look approachable, almost sweet. And his narrow
waist, his ass, his long legs… Dom didn’t know if Brian liked to, whatever, to top, or to bottom.
He hadn’t asked and wasn’t about to. But trailing after Brian into the club, he felt pretty certain
that just about any dude in the club would want to get a piece of that ass.

Presumably most of them would want Brian the other way around, too.

He’d thought about Brian on his knees, which was a shitty thing to think about a friend. It seemed
only fair to flip it, to make himself imagine Brian doing the fucking. What would that even be
like?

Dom wound through the crowd, hand on Brian’s shoulder in front of him so he didn’t lose him. It
was hard to imagine Brian fucking a nameless stranger. It was easier… or not easier, exactly, it
wasn’t easy at all, but it was more possible to imagine Brian fucking him. Brian’s teeth on the
back of Dom’s own neck, his breath coming hot and fast as he moved—

Dom swallowed hard. It was possible to imagine that, yeah. It made his heart thud like an
overclocked engine, made his stomach ache, but it was possible. He’d had enough alcohol, could
imagine that really happening, could hear himself saying it, _You should fuck me_. Could even, in a
strange way, believe that he could mean it. He was capable of taking a great deal of pain, of
distress, into his body, and _for Brian, with Brian_—

But it would never happen. Nobody wanted it to happen. They were putting on a show, Dom was
keeping Brian marginally safer while he pulled this job, and then they would part ways again.
That was all.

“It’s Sunday, honey,” Brian was shouting in Daisy’s direction. “And my housemate has to work
tomorrow morning, I can’t just leave him on the front steps all night.”

She pouted at him elaborately, conveying her disappointment more clearly than words over the
pounding bass.

Lise leaned into Dom’s shoulder. “We’re having a pool party at my place tomorrow afternoon.
Brian will give you directions. Kiss kiss!”

He blinked at her. These women were very welcoming of some guy they’d just met. Brian’s
charm went a long way.

Daisy waved them off and Dom followed Brian back outside.

“Your friends are strangely invested in getting me to hook up with you,” he observed.

Brian nodded absenty, checking his phone again. “Yeah, they get bored. Come on, let’s see what
Rome’s got.”
Brian didn’t know what he’d been expecting from Dom’s car, but the gunmetal-gray Civic coupe Dom ushered him into wasn’t it. There was nothing flashy about it: no running lights, no stickers, no specialty exhaust. Most people who saw it probably assumed it was a commuter car, though Brian could hear in the engine that it wasn’t factory-standard. Several after-market switches on the dash bore that out, though without labels it was impossible to say what they were for. NOS, maybe.

Dom saw him eyeing the car and chuckled. “I got warrants, man. Mia insisted that if I was coming back to the States I stay under the radar.”

“And you never ignore Mia,” Brian said dryly.

“Not when she’s right.”

“What can this thing do?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Dom rumbled, amused. “Maybe if this all works out, we can go out to the desert and I’ll kick your shitty little car’s ass around a highway.”

Brian watched him drive. If he didn’t know better, he would have said it sounded like Dom was flirting with him. Wishful thinking.

At the apartment, Brian ushered Dom through his front door and into the kitchen. Rome and Kumiko sat at the little round kitchen table, just the one light on overhead. In front of them, a bunch of Kumiko’s crap lay spread out: her tablet, her sketch book, her other tablet, an open Diet Coke, pens and pencils and styluses.

Rome looked up. “Finally, man. Come here. Wait, how drunk are you?”

Brian scowled. “Not drunk at all,” he lied. “What’s up?”

Kumiko looked up. “You’re not going to like this.”

“Should I be drunk for this?” Brian asked.

Rome hesitated. “Maybe? Hey, get me a beer too.”

Brian waved Dom to a seat at the table and retrieved three Coronas from the fridge, glad he’d had a chance to go grocery shopping. He popped the lids off and distributed them, then took the seat next to Dom. “Alright, what is this?”

“Fucking Orlov, man. He’s got a load of kids he’s selling to dirty old businessmen.”

Kumiko spun the bigger tablet around so the screen faced him and Dom. She swiped through half a dozen pictures: teenagers, both boys and girls, smiling for the camera. They looked like photos taken from Facebook or Instagram, mostly: cropped group shots, kids in soccer uniforms, a couple of bathroom selfies in what looked like a middle school restroom.

Dom leaned back in his chair. His knee bumped against Brian’s knee, and Brian didn’t move away. He was maybe a little tipsy—tipsy enough that he’d let Dom drive. If Dom didn’t mind touching, he didn’t. “Explain,” Dom said.

“You know how I’m a driver for Radomir Orlov, right?” Rome smirked. “Brian and I are competing, to see who can get Kumiko’s software into a Bratva computer first. Anyway, I picked him up at an office downtown this evening and this abuela comes up on him on the sidewalk. I’m supposed to be bodyguarding him, you know, chauffeur bullshit, but she’s like four feet tall and seventy years old so I don’t think nothing of it. Until she starts shouting at him, you know?”

“About these kids?” Brian asked.

“Got it in one. ‘Where’s my nieta, I know you have her.’”

“Orlov freak out?”

“Eh, it was aight. I got him in the car and got her to calm down by agreeing to meet with her once my shift was over.”

Kumiko set down her soda, “How’d you get her to go along with that, anyway? She must’ve thought you were some kind of mobster.”

Rome made a face. “Maybe I let her think I was an undercover cop.”

“Are you serious right now?” Brian asked, but was interrupted by Dom’s shoulders shaking beside him. He glanced over: Dom was laughing. “This isn’t funny, Dom,” he said, but Dom only laughed harder.

“I learn from other people’s mistakes,” Rome said. “Anyway, I buy her some diner food and she texts me these photos. She and some other relatives of these kids are convinced they’re being moved this week, mostly because they overheard one of Orlov’s goons say, and I’m quoting here, ‘Boss wants them in Philly.’ They’ve been bothering anyone they can get a hold of, including the
local cops, trying to get them to do something.”

Brian shook his head. “That’s pretty thin.”

“Pigs think so, too,” Rome said. “Half these kids aren’t even citizens, so they don’t give a fuck.”

“I will meet with her tomorrow morning,” Kumiko offered. “And with some of the other family members. They may have more information.”

“Are you going to tell them that Pearce here isn’t an undercover cop?” Dom asked, laughter still coloring his voice.

“Hey, man, I told her that already. Couldn’t let her go on thinking I was some kinda superhero would swoop in with a SWAT team.”

Brian flipped through the photos on the tablet, stopping on one of a boy with glasses. He had a backpack slung over one arm and his hair in his eyes, an expression on his face like he was waiting impatiently for whoever was taking the photo to hurry up and be done. “You know, man, it’s not that I’m not sympathetic, cause I am, but are we sure we just want to, what, try to steal these kids back from the Bratva? Just the three of us? We do not have the firepower.”

“Four,” Dom said. Brian looked over to see him gazing at Brian. They were sitting close enough together around the little table that he could see Dom’s eyelashes. “Actually, if we needed, I could get...” Dom thought for a minute. “At least three more people. Maybe four or five. Jacinto isn’t much of a scrapper and he can’t drive for shit, but he has some tricks up his sleeve. And he’s a teacher. He’d be furious about this.”

Brian could feel his cheeks heating as he returned Dom’s eye contact, but he couldn’t look away. The expression on Dom’s face, like he was making a promise, made Brian’s blood pound in his ears. On top of the feelings he’d been having all night, it was too much. He blinked deliberately and looked down at the tablet. “Rome? Kumiko?”

“I want to figure out how we could get more information,” Kumiko said calmly. “I won’t do it unless we know exactly where and when these kids are moving. They could be gone already. We don’t know, and I won’t get shot for nothing.”

“Do we know for sure that Orlov is the one holding them?” Brian looked at Rome, determined to ignore the way Dom was still looking at him and Dom’s knee was still pressed up against his. Ignoring Dom’s body heat so close to him was taking about 75% of his concentration.

Rome shrugged elaborately. “The fucker’s evil enough. I don’t know how I feel about pulling in people I don’t know though, man. This is a delicate sort of thing.”

Brian looked up at Dom again. He was expecting… irritation, maybe, that Rome didn’t trust him. But Dom’s gaze was even, steady. Brian chewed on his lip. Dom was basically offering to put his life, and the lives of his family members, in Brian’s hands. It was a huge change from earlier in the evening, when Dom was talking like he didn’t know Brian at all. It couldn’t be that easy to earn his trust back. Trust had to be more than just talking. Didn’t it? “You do mean Leon and Vince, yeah?” He asked. “And Jacinto—he’s the guy Letty’s marrying, right?”

“Yeah.” Dom nodded and finally looked away.

Brian took a breath and looked at Rome. “It’s fine.”

“It’s fine? You and this dude are eye-fucking so it’s fine?” He scoffed, getting up from the table. “You want another beer? I’m not sure I can have this discussion sober.”

“Hey, fuck you, that’s not—” Brian started, but Kumiko interrupted him.

“Don’t be an asshole, Rome, they’re faking it for the job.”

Brian took a drink of his beer to cover the sudden twinge at the reminder. She was right; Dom was the most loyal person he’d ever met. It wasn’t like Dom—loved him or anything. This was the job. He could do his job.

He took a deep breath, trying not to feel his lungs heaving like he’d been holding his breath. “So, what are you guys thinking? Find out when they’re moving the kids, hijack the van? Or truck, or whatever they’re using.”

Kumiko shook her head. “We need more information,” she repeated. “I’m modifying a program I have to get me into their email, but it will run into the same problem as the laundry program. They have really good security, and I can’t crack it without a tiny bit of physical access. Just get me five minutes with Orlov’s phone. Or laptop.”

Rome returned to the table and set down his beer bottle. “Hey Bri, bet you a hundred bucks I get access first.”

Brian snorted. “Yeah right, man. You’ve been inside Orlov’s house, what, one time? You got no chance!”

Dom took a swallow of beer, his elbow brushing against Brian’s arm. Brian was certain he successfully hid the tiny shiver that ran through him, until he glanced over and saw Rome looking at him with sharp eyes. Brian ignored him. “So we’re really going to do this? Liberate these
people from the mob?"

“If we can get the right info,” Kumiko cautioned, but she was suppressing a smile. She loved a good chase as much as anyone.

Dom raised his bottle. “Here’s to ripping off the Bratva.”

Brian clinked his bottle against Dom’s. “Here’s to introducing Letty and Rome.”

Dom smirked. “Now that, I wouldn’t miss.”

It wasn’t late when he got back to the hotel, not even one a.m., but Dom didn’t bother finding out if anyone else was still awake. He was in no mood to talk to Mia, let alone Leon or Vince. Fuck, if he brought the crew into this thing with Brian, he was going to have to explain to them about Brian, about pretending to be faggots with Brian. Vince was going to have a stroke.

Restless, he stripped down to his boxer briefs and wandered around his hotel room, then flipped through television channels for fifteen minutes before giving up on the home renovation re-runs that were the only even halfway decent thing on at this hour. He dug out his phone and pulled up one of his favorite porn vids. Thank Christ for the internet.

Porn only reminded him of earlier, though, in the club. He tried to focus on the actress’s ass as she rode a cock, the way her thighs shook and her ass rippled as she bounced up and down. It was hot, but thoughts kept intruding: he kept remembering Brian’s eyes glittering with a smirk, the way his hair clumped when it was damp with sweat, or a flash of a hand gesture. Little glimpses without context. It was distracting him from the porn. He was getting hard—he stroked himself through the cotton of his boxers—but he could tell this wasn’t going to do it for him.

Brian was bi, so presumably he still fucked women sometimes. That was what bi meant, right. Dom settled back against the pillows and let his thoughts merge—let himself imagine that Brian was the one fucking the girl on the screen. The guy in the video was sort of tall and blondish, skinnier than Brian was but it worked. It worked. He thought about Brian dancing, sweat sticking his shirt to the small of his back. Brian’s face alight as he was driving—he could almost see that intensity focused on another person. He could imagine Brian’s mouth, lips shining and wet, his long fingers…

He closed his eyes, letting the video run so he could hear the noise of flesh on flesh. It was—disrespectful. Wrong, to use thoughts of Brian this way. He felt cheap and almost, in a way, unfaithful. Like he was just using Brian for a meaningless orgasm. But Brian would never know, and he couldn’t deny that it worked. Dom’s lungs were working a little harder, his blood pumping. He flexed his abs, thrusting into his hand just a little. Yeah.

He opened his eyes to shove down his boxers and realized the video had finished. He clenched his jaw, debating with himself, before finally giving in and standing up to fish the lube out of his duffel. His nervous system was sparking, making him feel like a live wire, but not quite connecting the circuit that would make it easy to come.

Lube acquired, he settled back on the bed. Right. Brian fucking a hot woman. This was… he might as well admit to himself that this was what he was doing. The air conditioning kicked on, blowing cool air that felt good on his heated skin. He swiped through the suggested videos on the site, but none of them featured that same actor, the tall blond one.

Dom was struck by a crazy thought. It was a terrible idea, but… he flipped up to the top and began typing.

It wasn’t a surprise that ‘hot blond gay blowjob’ returned thousands of hits. Dom scrolled through the options and then picked one at random. But he got lucky. ‘Blond god gets his dick sucked’ featured a generic-looking blond man standing in a porn-set bedroom, a muscular boy with dark eyes already on his knees in front of him.

He skipped through the intro—the blond guy working his fingers into the boy’s hair, tagging at it, saying something he didn’t catch—and only let the video play full speed once the blond guy had his cock out, the other dude licking the tip, working his mouth around it. Dom watched, wondering if maybe Brian had done this exact thing, stood in some gay dude’s bedroom and let him suck him. He wondered how Brian liked it, what he liked to do. Was he rough? Maybe.

Dom stroked himself in time with the video, letting his body feel what it would be like. Brian liked to go fast, he liked to race and fight and Dom had never seen it firsthand but it wasn’t a stretch of the imagination to think he liked to fuck. Would he hold tight onto someone’s hair and push in and in and in until he—the some nameless face—gagged on his cock? Would he stroke in quick and shallow, all sliding friction? Would he go slow like the guy in the video, pull out and run the tip of his cock over a wet lip, denying, teasing?

Dom pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth, against the back of his teeth. His right hand, wet with lube, worked his cock. With his left he let the phone settle on the bed and then rubbed at his stomach, feeling the skin of his palm catch against the bare skin of his abs, the hair there under his belly button. Fuck. He needed—something.

The sounds from the video changed, got louder. Dom glanced over to see that now the blond dude was flat on his back on the bed, and the other guy was straddling him, slowly working his way
down the blonde’s cock. He was grunting, gasping; the camera focused on his face, which looked like he was seeing God. Lips bitten, tiny crease between closed eyes, flush risen in his cheeks, down his neck and his bare chest. That was hot even if it was a dude. That was—Dom wished the camera would focus on the blond guy, on their bodies. He wasn’t here to watch some fairy love taking a cock.

But the camera didn’t cooperate. It stayed in close, showing the guy’s face instead of the action. Not that he wanted to see the action—it wasn’t what he’d been looking for—this was just a face, the muscles in the guy’s cheeks jumping as he gasped, his mouth fell open, his eyelids fluttered.

Dom was pretty sure the guy wasn’t faking it. He’d seen faking it in porn, hell the woman in the first video had been faking it. This guy was really into getting fucked, moaning like a bitch as he rolled his hips. It was dirty as fuck.

The camera panned out again, slow so Dom could see the sweat on the guy’s chest as he rose and fell. Dom had a sudden sense memory: Brian, three years ago, sitting in the yard of the garage on top of the hull of some wreck, shirt off, drinking beer with Jesse and Leon in the hot sun, sweat glistening on his collarbones.

Dom swallowed. This was only working as long as he didn’t think too hard about it, and he could feel awareness creeping up on him. He pushed it away, worked his hand a little faster. Let his left slide down his side, his thigh, and then up again to pull and stroke at his balls. It was good: the sound of the porn, his hands working in time with the sound of slapping flesh, images dancing on his closed eyelids of Brian fucking someone, some woman or man, fucking their mouth with short, quick little strokes. Like that, yeah. Dom licked his lips. Brian pressing open that mouth with his thumb, dragging it open.

Brian discovering Dom like this, naked and voyeuristic. He would smirk, he would, he’d smirk and look at Dom from toes to head, gaze hot, and he’d say—he’d say, “So that’s how it is.”

And he’d crowd up in Dom’s space and he’d say, “If you want it, you know you just gotta ask for it, baby,” and he’d hold onto the side of Dom’s face with one hand, thumb on Dom’s jaw, fingers curling around to the back of his neck hot and firm, and he’d encourage Dom’s mouth to open around his cock, he’d press inside and Dom would choke—

No. No, not like that, that wasn’t—

He’d flip Dom over and bite him, bite his shoulders, curled up over Dom like he was covering him, stealing him away from the rest of the world. His cock would nudge up against Dom’s hole, just like Dom’s fingers were nudging now, circling around and pressing pressing pressing him open, open so wide, his knees splayed, exposed to the world but Brian there at his back so hot and solid and wet and Brian’s cock would slide in him so slickly and Brian’d whisper in Dom’s ear, “I got you, I got you,” and he’d dig his fingers into Dom’s hip and shoulder until it hurt, until he left bruises. Brian’d come like that, his hands clenching, he’d leave bruises right there like—

Dom held his breath, back arched and taut as the world fuzzed out around him. It was a good orgasm, really good, warm and bright. Dom rode the come down gradually, resisting the sounds of the world filtering back into his consciousness until he couldn’t any longer. He opened his eyes. The porn video was still going; he slapped at his phone to turn it off and sat up.

Come was cooling on his belly, his cock was covered in lube, and he’d just jerked it to gay porn. Wonderful. He hadn’t done that since he was a teenager who didn’t know how fucking up the world was; he’d thought he was over it.

In the shower, Dom rolled his shoulders under the spray, dissatisfied and not sure why. What had seemed like a good idea twenty minutes before was making him feel—sketchy. Weird. It wasn’t right of him, using thoughts of Brian like that. Just because Brian was bi didn’t mean he was fair game. It wasn’t like Brian wanted to fuck him; both kind and professional, he’d been so careful not to push too far into Dom’s personal space, even on the dance floor. Dom’s stomach knotted. Brian wasn’t about to push down on Dom’s shoulders with both hands until Dom got the idea and dropped to his knees, opened his mouth—

It hit him suddenly, blindsiding him. Brian’s hands weren’t Brian’s anymore, they were CO Ward’s and the smell of him was in Dom’s nose, choking him, and his pig voice was saying, “I could fill out an incident report on you, or…”

Dom’s stomach heaved and he vomited up the remains of the beer he’d drunk earlier, brown and foamy with stomach acid, all over the floor of the shower. He pressed one shaking hand against the wall to hold himself up. The water smoothly, inevitably washed the vomit down the drain.

He was still shaking when he got out, shivering like the shower had been set to ice cold instead of so hot it almost scalded him. He dragged on a pair of basketball shorts and a tank top and headed out to the hotel gym. He was too shaky to lift, but he’d remembered his hand wraps and he went at the heavy bag for a while.

By the time his arms were sore and his breath was coming so heavy he almost felt like he might puke again, he had mostly worked the shakiness out of his muscles. It was better not to think about any of it, he decided. Forget about the porn, about throwing up, everything. It wasn’t important anyway—just the mess inside his own head. What he should be thinking about was how he was going to break it to the team that Brian, Brian-the-cop, Brian who saved Vince’s life and broke Mia’s heart, was here in Vegas and Dom had signed them all up to work some crazy
job with him.

That was going to go over well.
Chapter 7

Dom tried to downplay the news. He was downplaying it to himself; if he didn’t think about shit, it wasn’t shit. It was just a job. So his plan was to present it so matter-of-factly that no one freaked out.

He brought it up over breakfast in Letty’s suite, as early as possible. If he was going to ask people to change their plans for the day from wedding prep to planning a rescue raid against the Bratva, he needed to give them time to plan. So Mia had only just started her first cup of coffee, picking at the mixed fruit in front of her, when he said, “So you know how I ran into Brian the other day.”

Mia glanced sharply at him.

“Wait, Brian-Brian?” Letty squinted at him. “The pig? Do we need to scramble?”

“What?” Leon looked like he was only half awake, scruffy bedhead a sharp contrast to the crisp neutrals of the main room of Jacinto’s family’s suite. Even half awake, it would take Leon maybe three minutes to grab all his crap and take off if they had to, though.

“He’s not a cop anymore,” Dom reassured them. “They threw him out when he wouldn’t narc on us.”

“You mean when he gave you his keys.” The look Letty shot him was pointed but Dom wasn’t sure why. She’d been happy enough to escape to Baja at the time.

“Hey, he didn’t just rescue Dom’s sorry ass,” Vince chimed in. He turned to Dom. “What’s the cop—ex-cop—doing in Vegas?”

“That’s what I’m telling you. There’s a job.”

Leon and Vince perked up. Even Letty looked cautiously interested; if it had been up to her, she and Jacinto would have eloped, but Jacinto’s mother was a hurricane. She got even more interested when Dom explained what Pearce had learned and what Kumiko had in mind.

“A hijacking, I like it.” She grinned. “I bet these gangsters are prepped for police ambushes when they get where they’re going. But if we catch them on the highway—pow.” She made an explosion hand gesture.

“Isn’t the point to rescue these people?” Mia asked dryly. “Not blow them up?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Letty said.

“A quién no estamos volando?” Jacinto asked, wandering in rubbing one hand sleepily over the faint fuzz of curly black hair nearly the same color as his dark skin; he saw the coffee pot and changed course directly toward it. He and Letty were sharing a room, much to his mother’s horror.

Letty re-explained the whole thing in Spanish as Jacinto blinked into a cup of coffee. Dom added on at the end, “I’m going with Pearce and Brian to meet with these abuelas in… he checked his phone. “Half an hour. You’re all welcome to come if you’re in. But this is your week, Letty. If you don’t want to get distracted—”

“Are you kidding?” Letty swigged down the last of her coffee. “This sounds way more fun.”

Everyone else seemed to agree. Even Mia pushed away her breakfast and rose to find her shoes.

“One more thing,” Dom added, as casually as he could. “Brian is infiltrating the Bratva by befriending the wife of one of their lieutenants. In order to seem nonthreatening, he’s, uh, he’s being her gay BFF. I’m going along to a few events with him, as backup.”

Vince froze, then frowned at him. “Brian is pretending to be a faggot? That’s gross, man. He must be in pretty bad shape if that’s what he has to do to get the job done.”

“Not pretending,” Mia said flatly. “Brian is bi. It’s fine, get over it, don’t be an asshole.”

Dom looked sharply at her. He hadn’t meant to out Brian, especially not to Vince, who could be vicious about that kind of thing.

Mia returned the glance, smiling slightly.

Vince frowned. “But—”

“I mean it, Vincent. He saved your life, so if you don’t have anything nice to say…?” Mia made a meaningful face.

Vince’s brow furrowed and stayed that way as they got ready to leave, but to Dom’s surprise he obeyed.

As they walked down the long hotel hallway, Leon cocked his head. “Hold on. If Brian is undercover—whatever. And you’re tagging along with him, won’t they assume you’re his… his plus-one? His—” Leon screwed up his face like he couldn’t bring himself to say the word boyfriend.
Dom scowled back. “Why the hell would I care what some mobster housewives assume or don’t assume?”

Letty snorted, but it could have been at whatever Jacinto was saying quietly into her ear. Then a harried white man and woman with three kids wearing souvenir t-shirts joined them in the elevator and everyone shut up. It was just as well. Dom wasn’t particularly interested in explaining himself, or explaining Brian, to anyone.

##

The garage where Rome told the family members to meet them was out on the outskirts of the city. Almost past the outskirts, into the desert. The garage itself was a big tin-roofed building with a concrete pad in front of it, but to the side was a large gravel lot dotted with cars in various stages of disrepair. Inside was a different story: there was dust everywhere, sure, a couple broken window panes and a big rusting toolbox on the main bench that drew the eye as soon as you walked in. But if you looked inside the toolbox, you saw only quality, well-maintained tools. And in the back of the garage, underneath sun covers and drop cloths, three tantalizing shapes were tucked away.

Brian wandered off while Rome spoke with the old man who ran the garage. He was short and brown and looked like he was about two hundred years old. Rome apparently knew him—or a friend of his? Brian wasn’t totally sure—from some racing gig way back, and now they were talking about modifying a 70s-era Camaro’s wheel wells to include concealed compartments. Brian should have been interested, from a technical point of view, but he was too nervous. Instead he picked around the back of the garage, nudging the drop cloths away to identify the back end of what looked an awful lot like a mint condition black 1979 Fox Body Mustang.

“Dom would love this car,” Brian said aloud.

“What?” Kumiko drifted over toward him
He dropped the cloth back over the car and straightened up. “Just a sweet muscle car.”

“Oh.” Kumiko looked away, bored. “Oh hey, someone else is here.”

Brian walked back out to the front of the garage to see three cars pulling up: Dom’s gunmetal Civic, a flashy older-model blue Nissan 240SX, and a white Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution that almost looked like it’d just been driven off the dealer’s lot, except for the aftermarket thin black stripes down the side. They parked, looking like they’d come from an alternate universe where everything was bullet-fast and showroom-chrome, and then people stepped out—people Brian thought he’d never see again.

The Evo was Letty’s, of course. She drove, and her passenger was a skinny, dark-skinned man he didn’t recognize. Brian was struck, as the man stepped away from the car, by the fact that he was wearing sandals with his wire glasses and linen pants. Not Letty’s type, he would have thought.

The Nissan held Leon and Vince. It was awkward seeing Vince again. Brian hadn’t seen him while he was in the hospital, on the advice of his union rep. That was back when he was afraid he might go to prison, so he’d listened when she said he should distance himself. By the time he was fired, Vince had been discharged from the hospital and was off the map. He’d never had a chance to… he didn’t know what the polite thing to do was when you saved the life of someone who hated your guts. Whatever it was, he’d never done it. Brian caught Vince’s eye, then had to look away.

He turned his head and saw that Mia was standing with one hand on the door to the Civic, looking at him. Her expression was friendlier than she’d looked when she tracked him down in the bar. Maybe they could be friends again, now that she’d said her piece.

He waved.

“Aight, cuz,” Rome said from behind him. “You going to introduce us or what?”

Brian snorted a laugh. “You know Dom already. This is his sister, Mia. Letty, Leon, Vince.” He pointed to each of them in turn. “Vince is the one who kept insisting I was a cop.”

Rome laughed. “Smart man. I’m Roman Pearce. Don’t judge me by the company I keep. Well, Kumiko here, she aight.”

Kumiko waved from her spot leaning against the doorway into the garage.

Rome’s ancient friend reappeared and said something in Spanish that Brian didn’t catch, but it seemed like everyone else did. Or at least, everyone followed him around the side of the building to a spot in the shade where an old Chevy pickup with no tailgate was parked next to a Buick Regal chassis so beat up it was impossible to tell what year it was. Old, anyway. A couple folding chairs sat next to them, an ashtray full of butts on a crate: the garage’s version of a break room.

The old mechanic disappeared again, leaving everyone to shuffle around awkwardly. Letty, her man, Vince and Leon stuck close together. Brian caught Vince eying him. He was going to have to talk to him at some point, but he wasn’t eager to have that conversation.

Rome looked around, huffed at the awkwardness, and stole one of the folding chairs. Mia perched on the back bumper of the Regal next to him, and Kumiko drifted over to lean next to her, apparently deciding that female solidarity was the right idea.
“What’s going down here, exactly?” Letty asked.

Brian wasn’t sure who she was addressing. Dom ignored her, standing just far enough out of the circle that he could see the road around the corner of the garage. He crossed his arms and looked out into the desert, his t-shirt straining at his arms when he rolled his shoulders back. Christ, the muscle on him.

“They’ll be here in a minute,” Rome said.

Brian swiveled to look at him. He’d been staring at Dom, and a quick glance around suggested Rome wasn’t the only one who’d noticed. Mia was looking at him with narrowed eyes.

“What?” Letty asked.

Rome explained what they knew. Brian didn’t have much to add—Rome was the one who’d actually talked with their contact already. He let himself listen and stole brief glances at Dom. Not too many; he was thinking about it too hard, so worried that someone was going to call him out for acting too queer that he couldn’t tell anymore what kind of body language would read as straight. He was too used to amping up the flamboyance for the sake of his cover, and having Dom right there, practically radiating hotness, was making him awkward.

Someone was going to comment on it, and he’d be lucky if it was only Rome. It would be enough to ruin whatever goodwill he’d built up with Vince, if Vince realized what those glances meant.

He looked at Rome instead, auditing his own posture and mannerisms for any of the effeminate gestures he’d schooled himself in before going undercover at Daisy’s second-favorite bar.

Still, out of the corner of his eye, he recognized the shift to alertness in Dom’s posture well before he heard the engine noise or saw the dust cloud. A rattling old Toyota pickup pulled up. Brian wanted to stop everything and give the truck a tune up, that’s how bad the engine sounded. Although, sinking parts into something so close to finished was pointless. He could see rust spots on the bottom edge of the driver’s door spreading through the green paint.

Both the driver and her passenger looked like they’d been housekeepers for fifty years. The driver’s hair was dyed a perfect black and her eyeliner was meticulously if darkly applied, but her clothes were Walmart quality and something about the way she carried herself seemed working class to Brian. She reminded him, actually, of Tia Menendez, Rome’s foster mother in tenth grade, who had been an underpaid social worker with a house full of other people’s children whom she loved fiercely but with very little money. No wonder Rome had jumped to help her.

She seemed hesitant to move away from her car. This must look dangerous to her, Brian realized. Dom standing there with his arms folded—he looked like a criminal.

Which he is, he reminded himself. We all are.

Rome recognized it, too, and bounced forward. Brian couldn’t help but smile at Rome’s body language: he looked like a high school kid again, that puppy-dog energy incongruous with his tattoos, his shirt with the arms ripped off. Both the driver and her passenger responded to him with smiles.

Finally everyone found a place to sit or stand, and Brian sat back to listen. His attention was caught by the way Dom leaned forward, intent. He’d never been sure if Dom realized just how charismatic he was, how flattering it was to have someone that powerful restrain himself and wait respectfully while you spoke. He wasn’t faking the respect, either. It made Brian wonder about Dom’s grandparents, if Dom ever really knew any of them. He knew both Dom’s parents were dead—that had been in his file, he’d known it before he ever met him—but he had no idea about grandparents, or other extended family. Were there Toretto cousins out there somewhere?

He filed the question away and focused on what the women were saying.

The driver, Mrs. Perez, had more photos, which she passed around on her smartphone. “This is the convenience store where my granddaughter was last seen. Her friends say she was seeing a man, a much older man, Russian. This is the hotel where they went sometimes. This is the man. His name is Pyotr Orlov.”

“His name is Pyotr Orlov,” Rome interjected.

“He works at this club, Prism, as a bouncer and bartender. That’s how he met Elida. She was always trying to get in to go dancing, even though she was only 17.”

“We think Pyotr is their main recruiter,” the other woman, Mrs. Garcia added. She cleared her throat. “He found my sister’s grandson and two other boys who were working cleaning in the hotels and offered them higher paying jobs, under the table. Angelo is just 16. The last time we saw him was two weeks ago, when he left for school. He never showed up at the high school, and neither did his friend Omar.”

Brian looked down at the phone. Two boys in basketball uniforms, arms on each other’s shoulders, grinned at the camera.

“So what do we know about this Pyotr?” Letty asked.

“He’s Bratva,” Rome said flatly. “An enforcer, for sure. I’ve seen him twice, at Orlov’s house. Skinny, a little twitchy. Likes black leather boots and Sig Sauer handguns. Wouldn’t surprise me if he was a recruiter.”
“He’s not married,” Brian offered. “The wives don’t really talk about him, so I’ve had him pegged as a small fish. He doesn’t even have his own house—just stays in his cousin’s pool house.”

“So where is he keeping them, then?” Dom’s voice rumbled.

Brian felt it in his bones and looked up, accidentally catching Dom’s gaze. He could feel his face heating for no reason and quickly looked away.

“The Bratva have plenty of properties,” Rome said. “The vor here has, what, twenty-two men under him?”

“Twenty-three,” Kumiko said.

“And they own a couple dozen businesses. We need to narrow it down.”

“We don’t need to know where they’re keeping them,” Leon pointed out. “We only need to know about them moving them.”

“Right, if we can catch them on the road,” Vince said.

“And how are we going to do that, if we don’t know where they’re starting from? We need to know what road they’re taking.” Dom sounded impatient.

“Do we know when they’re moving them?” Letty asked. “I mean, how do we know they’re moving them at all?”

The two abuelas looked at each other. “One of the other family members,” Mrs. Perez said. “Works in housekeeping at Polzin’s hotel. She overheard a conversation in the office yesterday morning. Pyotr Orlov was on the phone, telling someone to ‘get them ready’ because ‘the Boss wants them in Philly.’”


“Kind of hard to make a plan when we don’t know where or when this is going down.” Letty scowled.

“Have you gone to the police?” Mia asked hesitantly. Half a dozen people started to object and she held up her hand. “I know, I know, but they have resources. You have good information here, photographic evidence, names, multiple missing people. They could kick down some doors.”

Mrs. Perez sat up very straight. “Of course we did. Even though Omar and Mari are undocumented, we went to the police station and we told them. They said that sometimes teenagers leave home, that’s all, and there was nothing they could do.”

Brian winced. He knew nothing the Las Vegas PD did was his fault, but a tiny part of him still wished that the right side of the law and the good guys were the same thing.

“That’s where I come in,” Kumiko said. She reached for the phone with the photos on it. “If I can get into their system, I can answer these questions for you. But I need physical access, boys.”

“We know, we know.” Rome flapped a hand at her.

“Once we get access, we might need to move right away,” Brian pointed out. “We should be ready.”

A murmur of agreement swept the group.

“Well, say we end up hijacking a van like we’ve been saying, we’ve done that before,” Vince said.

Mrs. Garcia’s eyebrows went up, but neither of the old women said anything.

“Then we have half a dozen people the Bratva are going to want back,” Vince continued. “Then what?”

People started throwing out ideas. Brian watched a plan take shape, his eye more on how people interacted than the details. Details changed, but personality clashes could kill this. And besides, he wanted Rome to like Dom’s crew. He leaned against the old Chevy, being careful to keep his back and hips square so he didn’t look too much like the kind of guy who might look at Dom the way he was definitely looking at Dom, and threw out an occasional suggestion.

Kumiko and Letty’s man—what was his name? Jacinto?—were holding a quiet side conversation. Brian overheard something about “security matrices” and filed it away as not his specialty. It was interesting that the guy was more a nerd than a gearhead. Of course he could be both, like Jesse had been. Anyway, he and Kumiko seemed like they were getting along well.

Of the others, Letty was the most pessimistic, with Vince a close second. She shot down three of Rome’s ideas in a row and Brian started to worry that they might get into a real spat until Dom stepped in and cooled them both down with just a few words.

Brian couldn’t help but let his attention catch on Dom as he and Letty and Rome hashed out the beginnings of a plan. It felt like his lungs filled with better air when he was looking at him, like there was more oxygen in his blood. It was—he’d forgotten, made himself forget, how profound it
was to work with Dominic Toretto, how well it made him feel. Now that every cell of him remembered, going cold turkey again was going to be gruesome.

He didn’t have to worry about that now, he reminded himself as the meeting broke up and everyone returned to their cars. For now, they had a job, they had the beginnings of a plan, and he could worry about how it was going to feel when Dom disappeared again after they took on the Bratva and won. For now he was going to ride this rush as high as it went, no matter how stupid he knew it was in the long run. This was his only chance to get some tiny crumb of what he wanted from Dom, and if it was stolen, if he was pretending that Dom’s attention was actually affection—well, he was a criminal now, wasn’t he? Maybe he always had been. So fuck it. If he had to steal it, he would.

After the meeting with Mrs. Perez and Mrs. Garcia, everyone went their separate ways. Dom took a couple of hours to obey Mia’s instructions on how to put together paper flower arrangements for Letty’s reception party, and then Brian texted that he was waiting downstairs.

Dom spotted Brian’s car in the crowded hotel entrance and slid into the passenger seat of the Miata. “At least this thing is a convertible,” he said, adjusting his sunglasses. “Good day for it.” It was: hot and bright, the sky as blue as cotton candy.

“Well, I’m going to say that was my Supra,” Brian said. “Whatever happened to it?”

Dom made a face, almost hesitating to say it. “We had to chop it. It was too distinctive.”

“I wondered.”

“Got me across the border, though.” He wondered if Brian knew just how much gratitude Dom felt for that. Brian had, in the space of a single second, burned his own world to the ground for the sake of keeping Dom out of prison, and there was nothing Dom could do to repay that, ever. He would always be in Brian’s debt. He shook his head, banishing those thoughts.

Brian grinned. “What are you driving these days, anyway? You can’t tell me that Civic is the only thing you’ve got.”

“Well, hell no.” Dom chuckled. “Got me a 1970 Chevelle SS 454 with custom turbo—EFI, forged pistons. There’s a guy I know, actually my Zapotec neighbor’s cousin, who runs a shop with some very good fabrication equipment. And there’s this stretch of highway, out of town, couple miles of empty straightaway. Even some of the cops down there, they race.” He glanced at Brian. “I’ve done a nine second quarter mile.”

“You have not.” Brian’s tone was arch, gay—the kind of mannerism he put on for Daisy and her girls. It was reasonable; they were headed that way. Time to get into character. It still sounded strange when they were talking about cars, though.

“I have. Well, nine point four. But I could blow this flimsy piece of shit out of the water.”

Brian sucked his teeth in mock outrage, laughing, and Dom couldn’t help but smile back. They talked modifications to Dom’s Chevelle’s suspension, until Brian pulled into the liquor store parking lot.

“All Lise has is flavored vodka,” Brian said, wrinkling his nose. “I mean, it’s expensive vodka, usually. Although sometimes it’s Stoli Peach. She mixes it with pineapple juice and maraschino cherries.”

“Please tell me I don’t have to drink that.”

Brian laughed and tilted his head exaggeratedly, making a mincing, dismissive hand gesture. “Don’t worry, honey, only us fruits drink fruity drinks. Butch boys like you are allowed to drink beer.” He turned slightly more serious. “Or scotch or something if you want. Liquor’s why we’re here.”

A Ford Taurus rolled past and some guy yelled something out the window; Dom didn’t catch what he said. Brian raised a casual middle finger at the guy and continued without missing a beat. “I’m getting plain vodka to mix with orange juice. Screwdrivers aren’t too bad, and there’s always shots.”

“What was that?” Dom was still stuck on the guy in the car. It was weird, someone just yelling out of their car.

“Nothing. Just stupid kids.” Brian smiled, that wide glorious smile of his. “We can get beer, too. It’ll be different than most of Lise’s parties but I don’t think it’ll raise eyebrows. I’ll just play it a little more femme in contrast, you know?”


Brian shrugged. “He was just fag-calling. You know, guys think you’re pretty, they feel threatened and yell insults from safety. Well, maybe you don’t know.”

“That happens?” Dom stopped walking and turned to look after the car, which was already gone. No chance to beat the little fucker’s face in, teach him some manners.
“Sometimes,” Brian caught his eyes. It was a challenge; it reminded Dom of the first time they’d raced, that night out on the street when Brian got his ass kicked and wouldn’t admit it. His heart kicked up a notch.

“They ever come after you?”

Another shrug. “Not really.”

“What does that mean?”

Brian’s smile was gone. “It means that there are a lot of things in this world that I’m not afraid of, Dom, and I’ll be fucking if I start being afraid of some idiot frat boys on a bender in Vegas who can’t handle threats to their heterosexuality.” His anger lit up his eyes like lightning.

After a beat, Dom took a breath and started walking again. “Fair enough.”

“Besides, this job… I can’t be always thinking about how gay I look. I’m, you know, supposed to look gay. So I can’t stay in the habit of editing that out of how I carry myself, I’ll fuck myself up on the job.”

Dom clenched his jaw, processing. Finally, he asked, “Is that how you think of it? That acting—more, you know, straight. Or whatever. Is that the part that’s acting? Or are you acting when you’re being…” he trailed off. It felt like a dangerous question somehow.

“When I’m being a fag?” Brian tossed his head defiantly. “I don’t know. Both. Neither. Look, down in Miami, I know this drag queen.”

Dom snorted.

“No, really, she’s great. She’s a really talented performer. And the reason she’s so good is that when she’s on stage, she’s really being herself. You know? Carmen Gettit isn’t fake. She’s as real as anyone. And then Jorge, when he’s not on stage, when he’s selling cameras to tourists and going home to his wife and kids every night, he’s real too. No one is the same person all the time.”

“Wait, the drag queen is a straight dude?”

“Yep. People are weird, man.”

Dom followed Brian into the store silently. Brian’s attitude scared him, and he wasn’t sure why. It just felt heavy, looming over him. But Brian stood as tall as ever, fearless as a crazy person, full of joy. Always looking around him like he was falling in love with the world. Was being bisexual a part of that? Or was it just that he wasn’t afraid of being bisexual? Whatever it was, it was going to get him killed, the circles he ran in. Racers, car guys, fucking gangsters: none of them looked too kindly on—on faggots.

Even thinking the word made him feel sick to his stomach. He clenched his jaw and held the bottles Brian picked off the shelf silently, furious. Not at Brian—Bri was glorious. Just at those assholes too cowardly to shout their insults to his face so he could punch in their teeth, feel their cheekbones splintering under his knuckles. Just at the world.
Chapter 8

Brian mixed drinks like a bartender, Dom noticed. Daisy, Lise, Yulya, and half a dozen other women waved their hands from lounge chairs or the pool, too lazy or spoiled to get up and make themselves their own drinks, and Brian cheerfully twirled bottles and poured shots. Someone had supplied a giant pitcher of sangria, strawberries and chopped oranges floating in it, and Brian added a generous pour of vodka to it before setting it out on the minibar next to Lise’s pool.

Brian caught Dom watching and flickered a wink at him. “Couple years ago, I discovered that tending bar pays better than stripping,” he said.

“What, you couldn’t earn racing?”

Brian laughed. “I was down in Miami, you know, the racing scene in a single city is only so big once people learn your name. My friend Tej runs the races, and he’s persuasive, but even he was having trouble finding people who would go up against me. He started having to trick them, sub me in at the last minute when he had dropouts.”

“I can see how that would be a real trial,” Dom said dryly. Brian grinned at him. He glowed golden in the sunlight on Lise’s back patio, his hair a little windblown. A faint sheen of sweat stuck his t-shirt to his back. Dom wet his lips.

“Besides, I had to do something with my time. And,” Brian cut his eyes sideways at Dom, “I was just coming out, you know, to myself. Got this gig at a gay club and discovered that I could get as many phone numbers as tips.”

“You didn’t actually strip, did you?” Dom waited for the answer with a kind of dread in his stomach.

“Nah. Well.” Brian poured two shots of vodka and handed one over. “I did a little bit of go-go dancing once, when one of our dancers got food poisoning.”

Dom narrowed his eyes at Brian, not sure if he was serious. “Are you lying to me right now?”

“What? No, no, Dom, I’m not——” Brian looked Dom in the eye, intent. “I’m not going to lie to you again. I promise.”

Dom swallowed and looked away, then downed the shot to give himself a second to think. “Alright.”

“Brian!” Daisy called across the pool. She and the other dark-haired Asian woman—Dom couldn’t remember her name—were lounging on floats, hair and makeup perfect, only their feet dipping in the water in spite of the fact that they were floating in the middle of the pool. “Brian, while you’re over there, will you get me another cocktail?”

Brian poured out a glass of sangria, added a shot and a half of vodka to it, and waited for Daisy to slowly paddle her way over to the side of the pool.

“You’re going to get these ladies wasted,” Dom said when Brian was back in hearing distance. “That’s the idea.” Brian grinned. “You want one?”

“I think I’ll stick to beer,” Dom said, and fished a Corona out of the mess of hard lemonade and cans of club soda in ice in a cooler beside the minibar. There was no food anywhere on the patio, only alcohol and mixers, he noted. These Bratva wives were all thin as rails, stressed out from being so bored, but they knew how to drink.

About an hour later, Brian flopped down on a lounge chair beside him. “Come help me, um, ‘raid the kitchen?’”

A chair away, Yulya perked her head up a little. Dom smothered his glance over at her and looked at Brian, trying to decide the best response to make it seem like they weren’t about to try to break into Lise’s husband’s business. Finally, he rumbled, “Just you and me?”

By the way Brian’s eyes tightened, like he was suppressing a laugh, it was the right response. Brian bit his lip, playing along. “That’s what I was thinking, yeah.”

Dom looked down Brian’s torso, the bare golden skin of his chest where he’d taken off his shirt, down to his bare feet, his toes just as tan as the rest of him. The sun blessed that boy, he thought.

His eyes flicked up to Brian’s face and caught a weird expression there. Was he overplaying it? Too late to change tactics. “Alright. Let’s do that.”

##

The inside of Lise’s house was cool and quiet, the music on the patio dimming to a buzz when Dom closed the sliding doors behind them. Brian had never been further inside the house than the living room and the walk through the kitchen to the pool in the back, but it was a typical Vegas McMansion. He figured they’d have the best luck on the second floor, maybe near the front of the house.

“Just to be clear,” he said, not looking at Dom, “if anyone sees us, we’re looking for an out of the
way place to make out.”

He didn’t wait for a response, just headed toward the front of the house where he remembered seeing stairs. Dom’s footfalls behind him were quiet. Brian remembered breaking into Tran’s warehouse years ago, how Dom had been quiet as a cat even in boots. In bare feet he was a ghost.

The first two rooms on the second floor were guest bedrooms, perfectly made up and sterile. Lise didn’t have any children, and it showed, the house full of rooms that were only touched by the housekeeper who came in every day to dust. The third door off the hallway led to a bathroom, huge and tiled in white and tan. Like the rest of the house, it managed to look both expensive and soulless. Brian froze in the hallway. Was someone moving downstairs?

Dom looked at him with raised eyebrows and Brian held up a finger for stillness. There was someone moving. He heard a door close and then, after a minute, water running. Someone was in the bathroom below them.

He relaxed, but stayed still until the door opened again. Dom waited patiently beside him, so close Brian could feel the heat radiating off him. His skin was starting to goosebump in the cooler house, and as they stood there his nipples tightened. He bit down on the inside of his cheek hoping Dom wouldn’t notice. Finally, the sliding door opened and closed, and he turned down the hallway.

The next door handle he tried was locked. Brian fished his lockpicks out of the bottom of his pocket and went to work. After thirty seconds, Dom pushed him aside with a barely audible grunt. Brian swallowed hard and leaned against the wall while Dom handily picked the lock, doing his best to ignore the fact that Dom’s hand had been on his bare side. They were so close together that Dom’s arm was brushing Brian’s chest as he worked. Brian focused on keeping his breathing even; he could feel every hair on Dom’s forearm and it was making it hard to think. Fortunately, Dom popped the lock in less than ten seconds and they were in.

The room clearly belonged to Lise’s husband Evgeni, though it was more den than office. Shelves filled with basketball trophies, photos, books with uncracked spines, a leather armchair and a large flat-screen tv on one wall. No computer in sight, though.

“Look around for anything electronic,” Brian said. “A tablet or smartphone or anything.”

Dom nodded and started opening cabinets. Brian started on the other side of the room, rifling through the shelves and the drawers of the coffee table near the armchair. In the back of one drawer Brian found a loaded Steyr TMP—a fully automatic pistol. Rattling around in the drawer with it were three full thirty-round magazines of ammo. A chill washed down his bare back and he shut the drawer.

The room wasn’t that big, and there were only so many places an electronic device could be. Nothing looked even remotely like what they were looking for.

Dom met him on the other side. “The TV?”

“Maybe?”

“Try it.”

Brian fished out the little chip of a USB drive Miko had given him and inserted it into the side of the television. Nothing happened.

“How do you know if it’s working?” Dom went to the door and cracked it open, looking down the hallway.

Brian shrugged. “Kumiko said it might not look like anything, just give it thirty seconds and if it works she’ll get remote access.”

Dom nodded. A second later, he froze. “There’s someone coming up the stairs.”

“That’s someone coming up the stairs.”

“Shit.” Brian looked quickly around the room, checking nothing had been left out of place, and grabbed Dom’s arm. “Quick, get in the hallway.” He pushed Dom out of the door to the den and pulled the door shut behind them, pressing Dom up against the wall. He had about a second and a half to make it look natural: he ran a hand through his own hair and shoved his other hand up Dom’s shirt, holding him to the wall with the flat of his palm and a fierce look. He hoped Dom would interpret that as play along, or they were fucked.

“There you are!” Daisy came around the bend of the stairs and spotted them. She sounded delighted, and also drunk. Brian could feel Dom’s chest expanding and contracting against his, breathing quickly with the adrenaline of almost getting caught.

“Oh, yeah. Here we are. I was just, uh, showing Dom where the bathroom was.” Brian could feel himself blushing—not planned, but it worked. Dom’s abs were burning hot under his hand; he felt like a road flare standing there like this. “Um. We’ll be down in a minute.”

It didn’t deter her. She wove her way down the hallway toward them. “You’re not being a very good bartender, Brian. Disappearing to have sex in the bathroom.”

“Um.” Pressing up against Dom like this was making him hard. He felt like he might burst out laughing, hysteria welling up in his chest like a bubble of pressure.
“That’s not very friendly.” Daisy grabbed his arm. “It’s a pool party, Brian, not a sex party.”

“Yeah, Bri.” Dom’s voice rumbled through Brian’s bones. He didn’t know how Dom could sound so amused right now. “It’s a pool party.”

“Yes!” Daisy swayed as she grinned at him. “Come on down to the pool and make out there if you’re going to make out.”

“You’re just a voyeur,” Brian said, fond in spite of himself. “Fine, fine, we’ll go downstairs.” He stepped back, doing his best to let his hand slide out from under Dom’s shirt as un-irritatingly as possible. From the way Dom’s abs fluttered, he didn’t succeed. As he stepped back, he banged his hand against the knob of the door to Evgeni’s room and the handle turned, just barely.

“Wait, were you in Evgeni’s study?” Daisy suddenly looked much less drunk. “That’s always locked. Lise isn’t even allowed in there.”

“What? No,” Brian said. His pulse surged in his ears.

“Just here in the hallway,” Dom seconded.

Daisy cocked her head like a little bird and for a second Brian had a vision of having to knock her out and run before she called some footsoldiers over to machine-gun them down. But then she smiled and bounced on her toes. “Come on!”

Brian slowly followed her, making enough noise to cover the sound of Dom easing the door open, locking it and closing it again.

Dom caught up to him halfway down the stairs. “The USB drive will be ok?” he breathed into Brian’s ear.

Brian nodded, barely, and Dom relaxed, letting go of Brian’s arm. Brian hoped he wasn’t lying. It was small, black, hidden by the edge of the TV in an unused USB port. If someone was looking for it, they might find it, but hopefully that wouldn’t happen, ever, or at least not until this whole thing was over.

Outside, the sun beat down on them and it wasn’t such a trial to agree to get in the pool with Daisy. She and Lise had finally gotten off the floats and were splashing around. Even Dom stripped down to his swim trunks and joined them. Brian knew he was staring at Dom’s chest and shoulders but their cover was enough justification that he couldn’t make himself stop. Dom was just so fucking cut. He could probably lift Brian without breaking a sweat. He could hold him down with one hand. Brian could feel himself glazing over.

And then Dom dropped into the pool and came up dripping, splashing water in Brian’s face, and Brian’s heart squeezed. He wanted this, he wanted Dom playful and smiling at him, water dripping down his neck. He wanted to swim up to him and slide his hands across Dom’s broad chest, over his shoulders, feeling that hot, smooth skin under his hands. He wanted to really—

Brian ducked under the water, swimming from one side of the small pool to the other and then back, trying to get some mental distance. What he wanted he couldn’t have. This wasn’t real. He couldn’t lose track of that.

“Daisy says you were making out inside,” Lise informed him slyly when he surfaced next to her. “You’re going to make out out here, right?”

“What?” Brian spluttered. Water went up his nose and he coughed. When he shook it off, he looked at Dom, expecting anger or at least discomfort, but Dom was laughing at him.

“Kiss!” Marla shouted from her chaise on the other side of the pool.

“Y’all are some thirsty hoes,” Brian said, and ducked under the water again.

When he came up, they had moved on, Lise and Daisy hanging on the side of the pool complaining about their husband’s lack of willingness to part with their cash. Brian swam up next to Dom.

“You know this is weird, don’t you?” Dom still didn’t look freaked out, just amused. “Women are strange as shit when they think—” he waved his hand, out of words.

Brian squinted through the water in his eyes, trying to see Dom as he really was: a straight guy, undercover for a job, not actually interested in Brian rubbing up against him like his body was desperate to do. But all he could see was the way Dom was smiling at him, warm as the sunlight baking the back of his neck.

“Don’t freak out,” Brian said, and before he could talk himself out of it, he pushed himself through the water, up into Dom’s space, and kissed him.

Dom kissed back, his hands closing around the small of Brian’s back automatically so he didn’t drift away in the water. His brain had switched off as soon as Brian got close enough to touch, so the kiss didn’t surprise him. There was nothing in his head to be surprised. Just the feel of it, the warm slide of bare skin against his, the roll of hard muscle just under Brian’s skin, under Dom’s
hands. He could feel Brian’s spine, his hip bones under the lean muscle of his obliques. The slide of wet lip against his mouth, and Brian: his muscles flexing beneath his skin, the smell of him warmed by the sun, the lingering taste of wine in his mouth.

Dom opened to it, slutty, taking control of the kiss, guiding the movement of Brian’s tongue against his. It was good, it was really good, it was fireworks inside his skull and g-force molding his whole skeleton and joy: spinning around after a victory, heart huge in his chest, smoke from his tires rising into the air. It was fucking perfect, he’d always loved kissing and this was Brian, this was—

He broke away.

Brian looked back at him, eyes wide, face as stunned as Dom felt, like kissing hadn’t been his fucking idea. Dom’s hands still held Brian against him and Brian didn’t move to get away. He could feel Brian’s cock, half-hard against his thigh, and it was freaking him out, but distantly.

Someone whistled and Dom’s hands let go. Brian ducked under the water again immediately. 

Coward, Dom thought, and shook his head like he was shaking off a fly. Trying to get everything to sit straight in his skull again. He was buzzing like he was going to have to start a fight and suddenly he didn’t want to see Brian looking at him. He didn’t want to see Brian at all.

He hauled himself out of the pool and retreated to the minibar, downing a shot, quickly, and then pouring himself some sangria, Brian-style: mostly vodka. It wasn’t too bad, actually. The fruit was fruity, but the strawberries were balanced out with bitter grapefruit and something else—maybe the dryness of wine. By the time he’d finished the drink, his head was moving at a more manageable pace, and it didn’t hurt to watch Brian floating on his back next to Daisy’s float, his hands flicking droplets of water around as he moved them, telling some story.

“You guys have history,” Yulya said from the chaise lounge next to him.

Dom grimaced.

“It’s good,” she said, reassuring him. “Intense is good, yeah? Better than not feeling anything.”

“If you say so.” Dom shook his head again. She sounded like she knew what she was talking about, but he wasn’t so sure she was right. He couldn’t see how he and Brian were headed for anything but a crack up, no matter how this job turned out.

The drive back to Dom’s hotel was quiet, almost strained. Brian had put the top up, anticipating traffic once they got back downtown, so they didn’t even have the noise of the wind to cover it. Adjusting to the whiplash of pretending to be together then not pretending was difficult for both of them, Brian told himself. It was just—adjusting.

“That car is following us,” Dom said.

“What?” Brian twisted around.

“The black SUV.”

“What, the G Class?” The Mercedes Benz was four cars back in traffic, and while it was a distinctive make, a black SUV was a black SUV: it could be any of thousands of driver-service cars rolling around Vegas.

“Yep.”

Brian changed lanes, barely looking, and slid through a yellow light just as it turned red. “Gone?”

Dom slid low in his seat, twisted around so he could see behind them without being seen in silhouette by any driver behind them. “Looks like it.”

“It’s probably nothing,” Brian said. “Somebody’s limo service going our same way.” Still, he turned off the main road, jumped up a few blocks, and then turned east again. Dom stayed twisted around; Brian blinked away the memory of the first time he’d had Dom in his passenger seat, running from the cops that very first night. I’ll die before I go back, Dom had told him, and somehow that single sentence had realigned every single thing Brian held dear.

“They’re back,” Dom said.

Brian checked his mirrors. The Mercedes—it had to be the same one, there were only so many hundred thousand dollar cars on the road at any one time—hung behind him for one block, two, staying four or five cars back but not lagging behind. He started driving like an idiot, taking turns at random. This part of the city was laid out in a grid, which was good and bad: he wasn’t at much risk of taking a wrong turn and ending up in a dead end, but if the Mercedes lost them, it wouldn’t be impossible for it to find them again with a little logic.

He switched lanes without signaling, darting into a right hand turn lane and turning without stopping, barely yielding to the minivan that had right of way. The driver honked at him, but he ignored it.

“You think it’s Lise’s husband? Evgeni?” Dom asked. “You think he found the thumb drive?”
Brian shook his head. “No idea.” He took another right hand turn, then dove through a hole in traffic to take a left and then immediately cut into an alley behind a restaurant. He rushed through the alley, almost clipping a dumpster, and popped out the other side into a steady stream of cars headed away from downtown. Traffic was heavy, but moving fast enough that spaces opened and closed with some regularity.

Brian took advantage of it, his heart pounding and the adrenaline making his reflexes snap. He snuck into spaces almost too small to hold the little Miata, accelerating and braking, ducking and weaving until he was far ahead of the place they’d entered the arterial. Finally he turned off onto a side street and dropped down to the speed limit.

“We lose ‘em?” he asked, turning again.

“I think so,” Dom said, but he stayed slid down in his seat.

“Aight.” Brian’s voice was steady but he could feel the adrenaline starting to cut in, making his legs feel shaky. He circled a block and when there was still no sign of the SUV, took an abrupt left into a little alley. The alley turned into a parking lot that went along the back of a row of shops. He pulled in between two big SUVs, hiding the Miata from the street.

“Wait five?” Dom asked.

Brian nodded.

In the quiet of the car there was nothing to do but wait, carefully not looking at each other. An alternate universe version of his life danced in Brian’s head: instead of awkward silence, he reached over to Dom, unzipped his fly and stroked him hard and then leaned down and took Dom’s cock into his mouth, hot and quick and dirty, the angle making his mouth water until Dom’s cock was soaked with it, Dom’s hand on the back of his neck and his hips thrusting up, jerky because he was just as hot for it as Brian was—

He looked out his window, knuckles knocking a rapid pattern on the steering wheel. Hiding like this was a gamble. If they were found, they could get blocked in, cornered.

“There’s a pistol in the glove compartment,” he said, but made no move to get it out.

“You think one pistol is going to do us any good against the Bratva?” Dom asked, sour. Brian paused. “We probably lost them.”

Dom nodded, then opened the glove compartment and fished out Brian’s M&P 9.

“This is such a cop gun,” Dom said. He sounded amused. Brian couldn’t help but look over at him.

“Hey, you’re the one that likes American muscle,” he said. “Doesn’t get more American or more muscle than a Smith and Wesson.”

“I guess not.” Dom checked the clip and resettled in his seat. “So. You think it’s Evgeni? You think we’re fucked?”

Brian chewed on the inside of his cheek thoughtfully. “I don’t know. Maybe? But why would he put a tail on me if he found the drive? He knows where I live—or at least Daisy does. She thinks I’m an underemployed gay bartender who lives in an apartment with a couple friends. That’s it.”

“Except if they found Kumiko’s program, they’d know you’re not who you say you are.”

“Still. Why not just grab us as we left Lise’s house, or wait for me to show up with Daisy tomorrow or the day after?”

Dom grunted.

“It doesn’t make sense, man. Bratva don’t go in for theatrics. They just decide whether or not they like you, and if they don’t, they shoot you. They’re not complicated.”

“So maybe it’s not the Bratva,” Dom said slowly. “I wonder…” he trailed off.

“What?” Brian asked, curiosity piqued.

“Jacinto mentioned something before we drove up here. I’ll have to ask him.”

“What did he mention?” Brian pressed, annoyed. He wasn’t sure if Dom was being deliberately close-mouthed with him or if it was just the habit of not trusting people, but his nerves were raw at the moment and he didn’t have the patience for it.

“He’s Cuban—they have a lot of mobsters. Or at least, the people he runs with know people. He said something about the mob here, the power vacuum after the FBI hobbled the Italians in the 90s and 2000s. But I’ll have to ask him the specifics.”

“Aight.” Brian watched Dom’s hands so he didn’t have to look at his face. It was easy to imagine those hands moving on him, in him—but it was difficult to imagine it. It would never happen. He needed to hold that truth in his head. He kept trying to but it kept slipping away from him the second he looked away from it. His own hands kept tapping on the steering wheel and he didn’t bother trying to stop. Too much adrenaline, that was all.
He pulled out of the parking lot, looking around, and carefully drove a circuitous route back to
Dom’s hotel. It took half an hour, but Dom didn’t speak again.
Chapter 9

Nope, nothing. Brian glared at Kumiko’s text. Hacking in through the television had been a very long shot, but it still sucked to see it confirmed that they hadn’t been successful.

“Didn’t work?” Dom guessed.

Brian shook his head. He was propped almost casually against the wall just inside Dom’s hotel room. He could see a duffel spilling over with clothes on the floor on the far side of the bed, and it suddenly felt too intimate for him to be standing here, now that he didn’t have a good excuse.

“We’ll have to try again.”

“Or maybe Pearce will beat you to it.”

Brian shrugged. “Our next chance won’t be for another forty-eight hours. I hope we don’t end up being too late.”

It was Dom’s turn to shrug. “It is what it is. We don’t have the resources to try to break into every Bratva-owned property that we know about in Las Vegas. And that’s not even counting the properties we don’t know about. We’re doing what we can.”

Brian frowned. He didn’t like it. Beyond just wanting to rescue these kids, which he did want to do, he hated feeling outgunned. But there was no point in talking about how powerless they were at the moment. He was just avoiding what he was really thinking about.

“Look,” he said. “I owe you an apology. I could have played off Daisy’s teasing instead of kissing you. I shouldn’t have surprised you with that, not without asking first. Or—I shouldn’t have done it at all. Sorry.”

Dom frowned at him silently.

Brian shifted his weight to his other foot. “I can go to Daisy’s party alone. That might be the best idea. I was planning on doing this alone in the first place, you know. I can handle it.”

The furrow between Dom’s eyebrows got deeper. “Have you forgotten about being followed? That was, like, an hour ago, man.”

“And I lost them just fine, didn’t I?” Brian held Dom’s gaze, trying to communicate with his eyes what he didn’t seem to be able to communicate with words.

“Nah,” Dom said.

“Nah? That’s it, just nah?”

Dom nodded.

“What the fuck. I’m not giving up on this,” Brian burst out. “Whether you think I can handle myself or not, I’m going to get those kids out.”

“Not what I meant.” Dom’s gaze was intense.

“What did you mean?”

“I meant I’m with you.”

Brian paused. He didn’t know what to do with his hands, finally shoved them into his pockets.

“Alright. Look, I promise I won’t—that won’t happen again.”

“It’s fine,” Dom rumbled, turning away. “If you think it gives us better odds at stealing from the mob without getting shot, feel free to kiss me. I trust your judgment.”

Brian blinked, swallowing down a blurt of surprise, a weird lump in his throat. “OK.”

It had been a long day, and he’d drunk a fair amount of alcohol and gotten enough sun that his skin still felt warm, but Dom couldn’t sleep. He’d been trying to keep his distance from the job, emotionally, but they all had the pictures Mrs. Garcia had provided, and there was one of them, Mrs. Garcia’s sister’s grandson, Angelo. He could be Mia’s son, fifteen years from now: dark eyes, thick black hair, narrow chin and wicked smile. It was difficult to think about what might happen to him, what might be happening to him right now. He’d tried to downplay it with Brian, how intensely he felt, but he was determined to see this job through. They were going to rescue those kids, or get shot trying.

Dom took a deep breath and let it out, staring up at the ceiling. Brian had been freaked out by that kiss. It wasn’t anything, though. He’d already filed it away with everything else he didn’t think about. It was almost offensive that Brian was so put off by it. If he didn’t want to kiss Dom, no one was making him. Dom certainly wasn’t.

It wasn’t like he was ugly, though. Brian had plenty of hot men and women hitting on him all the time, sure, but, I’m not bad looking, he told himself. He ran his hand over his scalp, down his face, then let his arm fall to the bed, over his head. His other hand rested on his stomach.
He was being dumb. This whole thing was messing with his head; it wasn’t like he wanted to be, what, hot? Pretty? He didn’t need that bullshit in his life.

Dom rolled over and buried his head under his pillow. Eventually he dozed off, but his dreams were full of indistinct shapes grasping at him, crowding him. The smell of concrete. He drove and drove down endless, featureless city streets. A black SUV chased him through LA and no matter how he turned he couldn’t lose them.

He woke up at five a.m. and dragged himself down to the gym. The treadmill in front of the east-facing window was unoccupied, and he ran steadily, watching the sun rise as sweat poured down his back. Eight miles later, he felt almost normal.

##

Brian tapped a cigarette out of the packet and lit it, and stood back to survey his work. They needed a start-to-finish plan, from tracking the Bratva to stopping them on the highway to carting off half a dozen or more scared kids. Letty said it was better to ditch the Bratva’s van as soon as possible, and Brian agreed with her—he was really hoping to make it through this job without getting any of them on a Bratva hit list. Which meant surprise. It meant not a single Bratva footsoldier could ever see any of their faces, and their vehicles had to be anonymous.

Papa Otero, the old man at the garage out in the desert who was friends with Rome somehow, had gotten them a stack of license plates, some odds and ends, and a fucking Escalade. Black, six or seven years old, mis-matched Arizona plates, professionally cleaned. Stolen, no doubt. That would work in their favor, Brian thought: he’d filed the VIN off the door frame, the back axle, everywhere he could find it, and switched out the plates for an inconspicuous Nevada pair from Otero’s stack.

The cops would be able to ID it eventually, if they ever recovered it and then put in the effort to track down individual parts. But knowing where the tires had been sold before they were put on the car that was then stolen wasn’t the same as knowing who had used the stolen car in the commission of a crime, as Brian remembered frustratingly well. Even if the Bratva had their hooks in the local PD, which he sometimes suspected they might, Dom’s team would be safe.

That was only the beginning of getting the thing ready for a hijacking, of course. He was glad; the work took his mind off Dom. He didn’t know where they stood. Dom had barely seemed to notice that Brian had slipped up and kissed him for no fucking reason. Brian couldn’t stop going back and forth over whether that was better or worse. Dom didn’t care, but on the other hand—Dom didn’t care.

And there were only two more cigarettes in this pack, fuck.

The first few weeks in Vegas, before he charmed Daisy into inviting him to karaoke with her friends, he’d had plenty of time to put roll bars and racing-grade seatbelts into his Miata along with the V8 engine. Rome’s car, a 1971 Camaro he’d won off a guy in an unlicensed poker game right after they first got to Vegas, was less prepped for this kind of work, although it had been tuned pretty well for drag racing even before Rome got his hands on it. He’d been tinkering with it, but not seriously—most of the time he was driving Orlov’s BMW, and then when he got back from working those shifts he’d gotten in the habit of lazing around and playing video games with Kumiko.

The good thing about the Camaro was the big bench seat in the back. They could probably stuff four people back there, maybe even five if they were skinny, which most of the kids in Mrs. Garcia’s photos were. That plus Letty’s Evo, Dom’s Civic—it would weigh them down, but they could fit passengers. And if they pulled off the hijacking competently, they wouldn’t need to race away from the scene.

Pulling off the hijacking was the purpose of the other mods Brian had been working on. He sucked on his cigarette and let the hood of the Camaro drop. Yeah. This was going to be fun. Going undercover with Daisy and her girls was its own kind of fun—he wasn’t about to brag about it, but he’d gotten his dick sucked with a great deal of regularity the past few months—but he missed racing. He missed that feeling, when it was like he became part of the machine, and he had to win or die.

He stubbed out his cigarette in the old soda can on Papa Otero’s workbench that served as an ashtray and got back to work.

#

He was surprised to hear female voices in his kitchen when he stepped in the front door. Rome wasn’t working until later, but Kumiko was out with Mrs. Garcia, surveilling Pyotr Orlov for a sign of where he was holding his victims. Kumiko had floated the idea of trying to steal Pyotr’s phone, a little bump-style pickpocketing. Brian knew she was okay at it, but he didn’t want to risk it. If Orlov lost his phone, he’d be suspicious immediately, and their timeline would compress drastically. Better to have Kumiko floating around watching, looking harmless, just another drunk tourist in the big city.

“No, Roman, you’re wrong!”

Of course it was Letty huffing angrily at Rome. She sat at the table across from him. Between them, Mia was laughing.
“Don’t talk like I never done this before,” Rome said. He was smiling, too. “I done my share of high speed bullshit. Yo, Bri, you remember that time we switched cars doing eighty miles per hour on that highway out in Texas?”

“I remember.” Brian had to grin at him—that had been a damn good time. “In fairness, we did have a third person in that. And it was maybe more like fifty miles per hour.”

“Fuck you, man, we was going more than fifty.”

“I’m not saying you’re not a good driver,” Letty said impatiently. “But hijacking takes certain skills, and our team has worked together—”

“Give it a rest, Letty,” Mia said. “We don’t even know —”

Letty waved a hand at her, cutting her off. “I’m just saying. He hasn’t worked with our team.”

“What are you guys arguing about?” Brian asked.

“I don’t even know anymore,” Mia said.

Brian rolled his eyes and left them to their argument to take a quick shower, washing off the grease and dust. When he returned, they were arguing about something else—brands of HVLP paint guns maybe? At least, Letty and Rome were arguing. Mia appeared to be on Rome’s side, chiming in occasionally with a supportive comment. Brian stood in the arch between hallway and kitchen and watched for a second. It was good to see them bickering, like they’d known each other for ages instead of days. It felt right, Rome and Letty and Mia together.

“You guys want to get dinner?” Brian asked, stepping forward.

Rome looked up. “I can’t. Gotta leave for work in a minute. I’ma get into Orlov’s computer and then it’s gonna be on.”

“I could eat,” Mia said. She and Letty exchanged an unreadable look. “What’s good?”

Brian took them to a cheap taco shop down the road, where a lot of the domestic staff who worked on the Strip and lived in his neighborhood ate. It was crowded, but they grabbed a table outside in the fading sunlight. The dry heat felt comfortable, cradling him; after a day spent by himself, tinkering around with some pretty cool cars, he was in a good mood. Even the weird dynamic with Dom, which made him feel like his spine was being pulled painfully out of his body when he thought about it, couldn’t bring him down.

“You look happy,” Mia observed as they sat down with trays of tacos.

Brian nodded agreeably. “It’s good to work with a bigger team again, you know? It’s been only me and Rome for a while, sometimes with Kumiko or our friends Tej and Suki.”

“That why you got into this ‘undercover’ mess?” Letty asked. “Or was it just a natural fit, what with you being such a fucking liar and all.”

“Oh my god, Letty,” Mia said, scandalized. But Brian noticed she didn’t do anything else to change the subject.

“It’s one reason,” he admitted, looking Letty in the eye. “We got onto this job because Kumiko asked us. She’s a friend.”

“And you’re such a good friend.” Letty stared back. He’d forgotten how fearless she was, bright with bravado like the white hot core of a star.

“I try to be.”

“Speaking of friendship,” Mia said, not even trying to be subtle. “You and Dom are working closely together these days.”

Brian faltered. He thought the conversation he’d had with Mia had put everything right between them but maybe that had been naïve of him. She obviously was still uncomfortable about some part of it. “He volunteered. He kind of insisted.”

“And you like working with a team,” Letty said.

“Whatever it is you want to say, Ortiz, just say it.”

“What she’s saying,” Mia said, “is that we’ve noticed that you and Dom have gotten real close, real quick. And with this whole persona that you’re working here, we have some concerns.”

“What kind of concerns?” No choice but to brazen it out. If Mia thought he was going to betray Dom again… he couldn’t blame her, but he was going to grab for any chance he could find to prove to her that he was more than lies.

“Are you fucking with Dom’s head on purpose?” Letty asked. “Because that’s shitty and you should stop.”

“Am I fucking with his head?” Brian narrowed his eyes at her, trying to figure out her angle. “No?
“You’re not, like, getting up in his space,” Mia said.

Brian felt a twinge of anger. “No. What, you think that because I’m not as straight as you thought that I’m some kind of—what, sleaze? That I’m out here trying to recruit people to the homosexual lifestyle? You think Dom would even let—”

Letty held up her hand. “I think both Mia and me know you’re not that kind of creep, O’Conner.”

Brian stared at her, mystified. “Do you? Cause it doesn’t sound—”

“That’s not it,” Mia said.

“Well, what then? Dom is straight, by some fucking miracle he’s decided he still wants to be friends with me, we’re working a job. That’s all.”

“You’re not into him?”

Brian snapped his gaze over to Mia. “He’s straight,” he said slowly, trying to get his thoughts in order, trying to distance himself from the curl of pain in his gut. “Is this, what, you just want to be real sure I know how straight he is? I know, OK. I know.”

“Alright.” Mia smiled at him, hostility gone.

Time to change the subject before this conversation got any more difficult. He swallowed, feeling like he was swallowing glass. “Anyway. How did it go today?”

Mia sighed. “The drive to Flagstaff is as long as we thought it would be. But the women I met with there say they can help our trafficked people. I even got them to agree to send a car to meet us in Kingman if we call when its time.”

“There’s got to be a better word for them,” Letty said. “’Trafficked people’ is…” she wrinkled her nose.

“Victims? Kids?” Brian offered.

Letty shook her head, unsatisfied.

“We didn’t tell them our plan, of course,” Mia said. “I definitely got the sense they don’t want to be complicit in anything illegal. But if we show up with a handful of kids who need a safe house, they’ll help.”

“They did suggest that we make a donation if we’re able,” Letty said dryly.

“Yeah, they definitely thought we were some kind of shady.” Mia crunched through a taco shell. “Can’t blame them really.”

“Speaking of shady,” Letty said. “I didn’t tell you, Mia, but Jacinto thinks he knows who was watching us earlier.”

“Someone was watching you?” Brian sat up straighter. “Mercedes Benz G Class, matte black?”

“Yeah, you know them?” Letty asked. “Friends of yours?”

“Back G Class followed me for a bit yesterday, but I lost them. I was afraid they were Orlov’s guys, but I didn’t recognize the car.” Brian waited for Letty’s answer.

“What did Jacinto say?” Mia asked, mouth full.

“There’s a family business, out of Havana. Import-export, you know. Run by a pair of brothers by the name of Ximenez, Marco and Raidel. Jacinto’s got a source that says they’re expanding west from Florida, setting up wholesaling arrangements with local retailers.”

“So they’re here in Las Vegas to, what, establish ties with the Bratva?” Brian frowned. “That’s not good.”

Letty shrugged. “In Miami, they don’t get along with the Bratva. They have different business styles. Raidel doesn’t like to be so thuggish, and he doesn’t approve of human trafficking. He’s a gentleman or something. But you know what they say: el dinero no tiene olor.”

Mia finished her tacos and stole the last half taco off Letty’s tray. “So the question is, is it them? And if it is, what do they want? Are they making deals with the Bratva, or…?”

Letty narrowed her eyes at Mia. “Are you thinking we play them against each other? That’s mad risky, sis.”

Mia smiled. “I’m just thinking out loud.”

She looked every inch a Toretto, Brian thought: a speed freak just like her brother. She was just more subtle about it. A thought occurred to him. “How does Jacinto know all this? He’s not in trafficking, is he? Dom said something about teaching school.”

Letty smiled. “He does teach, but when he was younger, he was a writer. He still writes
sometimes, essays and things. His publisher isn’t certified—they’re underground—and some of his colleagues are fairly well connected in la bolsa negra, unofficial news channels.”

“Wait, your fiancé is a revolutionary?” Brian cocked his head. “Damn, girl.”

Mia cocked her head at him. He’d sounded really gay just then, he realized. She hadn’t seen him put on that affectation like that before. It was so easy to fall into working with the team again that he could forget just how much history lay behind them, all tangled up. But Mia was smiling, and Letty was laughing and preening that she’d somehow found someone who might in some ways actually be a more dangerous person than Dominic Toretto. In a way it felt like hanging out with Daisy and her friends—like he was one of the girls, not under pressure to posture and show off how tough he was. He could just be a person. It was nice, even if things couldn’t really be like that, to have the illusion of belonging.

Rome got back from his shift at two a.m., grumpy as shit because Orlov had had him driving all eight hours he’d worked, putting around town from parking lot to parking lot while Orlov went inside to do business. The people who paid off the Bratva not to hassle them saw him coming and pulled out their taxes, so he never stayed long, but Orlov wasn’t above taking advantage of a place’s hospitality while he was there. So he went around to strip clubs and collected dues from the proprietors, collected a dance from his favorite dancer, and moved on. And Rome didn’t get anywhere near his house or laptop or even his phone the whole time.

Their original plan factored in this kind of bullshit, allowing them months of leeway to gain access. But now they were feeling the crunch. Rome slammed around the kitchen, bitching to Brian while he made himself an omelet. Brian sat at the table with his laptop reading about the latest electric car specs coming out of Tesla’s trade show, and listened with half an ear.

“It’s lookin like it’s up to you and your boy to go into the actual lion’s den,” Rome said, sitting down at the table.

“Guess you’re going to owe me a hundred bucks,” Brian observed.

“You’re going to need it to fancy up that little toy car of yours.”

“I don’t know how many times I’ve told you: not everyone needs a replacement dick to make themselves feel better.”

“Man, fuck you.” Rome sounded exhausted. Brian didn’t envy him his role. In some ways it was easier, to be just a driver, but it didn’t suit Rome. He wasn’t built to take orders and smile at someone else’s shit, especially not while driving someone else’s very expensive but factory-standard car.

“At least you can feel better knowing you don’t have to dress up for a party with Daisy Mozhayev.” Brian sighed. “I’ve got to figure out what clothes Dom has with him—he’s here for a wedding so probably he’s got something.” He glanced up to see Rome giving him an eyeball.

“What?”

“You know that man is never going to fuck you, don’t you?”

Brian glared. “Yes, he’s straight, I know. Christ. What is with everyone today?”

“I dunno, cuz, maybe it’s the crush you have on him that’s big enough to see from space.”

Brian looked away and rubbed at his eyes. There was really nothing to say to that. Rome had always been able to see right through his bullshit, ever since they were kids.

“Look, Bri.” Rome’s voice softened. “All I’m sayin is, don’t get too attached. This is gonna be over pretty damn quick.”

“Yeah,” Brian said. “Yeah, I know.”
Dom spent Wednesday morning driving Mrs. Barquin around the city, getting familiar with the streets under the cover of helping her run errands and carry shit. He’d almost forgotten that Letty and Jacinto were getting married in, like, twenty-four hours—he was going to miss the bachelor party to go undercover with Brian. Mrs. Barquin had frowned disapprovingly when she heard that, but had surprised him by not objecting. Although she had made him carry dresses around a department store for her for three hours, so maybe that was her way of telling him that he was disappointing Letty, and her, and all mothers and mothers-in-law everywhere.

After her errands were done, champagne and cake and flowers and clothes acquired or confirmed for delivery the next morning, he picked up Vince and drove around again, slowly solidifying routes in his mind. It was sketchy—the Bratva were all locals, they would always know the city better than Dom or anyone could learn in just a day. But it was better than nothing, and looking at a place with fresh eyes could be useful too. Vince and Leon and Mrs. Perez had narrowed down some locations where they thought the kids might be. Armed Bratva were thick on the ground at a couple of the strip clubs Polzin owned through subsidiaries, and there was a shitty motel that Kumiko had identified as having three times as many security guards on the grounds as usual.

Vince came across as an idiot most of the time, but Dom valued his eye for tactics. Together, they spotted several blind corners, one-way streets, complicated intersections, and overpasses that could be useful. A hijacking in town was likely to draw the police in quickly, of course; they debated the potential of that. Vince was leaning pretty heavily in favor of making a mess and letting the cops clean it up, but Dom was reluctant to risk getting the victims caught up in the web of Child Protective Services or ICE. Not to mention he didn’t want to get arrested himself.

They got back from a scout around the highways out of the city in late afternoon. Dom parked at the Mirage and Vince slid out of the passenger seat, smirking. “I’ma go find Leon and lose some money on the slots. I think it’s time for you to go get pretty, isn’t it?”

Dom clenched his teeth and didn’t respond. Vince had been surprisingly cool about the whole undercover-gay business, but it wasn’t a surprise that he felt the need to dig at Dom’s dignity a little bit. He didn’t mean anything by it.

At the entrance to the hotel they parted ways. “Have fun sucking the cop’s dick,” Vince said cheerily, waving.

“Shut your fucking mouth,” Dom snarled instantly. That was too far.

Vince reared back. He looked hurt for a second before laughing it off. “Whatever, man. See you later.”

Dom leaned against the wall of the elevator up to his room, staring moodily at his own reflection in the burnished metal. He needed to get his head in the game and stop overreacting to things if they were going to pull off infiltrating this party. Brian wasn’t picking him up until eight—they had to drive together to get into the Mozhayev’s gated community, which didn’t help him feel less like a girl going to prom—so he had time. He just needed to focus.

Focus was difficult to come by. He shaved and showered, ate a room service sandwich, picked out a plain white shirt and gray slacks to wear and left them on hangers while he flopped back on the bed. He was seriously being a girl: fifteen, pigtails, pink lipstick. Moody as fuck. He scrubbed his hands over his face. At least one of the kids the Bratva were holding was fifteen. That’s why he was doing this. All the bullshit between him and Brian was completely beside the point. It was…

Jerking off to thoughts of Brian had been a mistake. It felt like—one, when he was twelve, he’d been helping his dad install new windows in their kitchen. They’d been sliding the wooden frame into place and the side of his hand had caught on a rough section of wood. A three-inch splinter had embedded itself into the side of his palm, and when he’d tugged carelessly at it, the end of it broke off deep inside his skin. His mom had had to cut it out with a straight razor after it got all infected and swollen. He’d felt it every time he moved his hand for weeks.

This pain was similar: a sting that colored every action. All the old hurt from Lompoc was stirred up, the deep infection inside him cut open and bleeding everywhere. He ached with it, the fear like ice in his bones made him mean and tired. Maybe it was good, though. Maybe, like his hand, it would heal better after.

You ready? Brian’s text flashed on his phone’s screen.

He wasn’t, but. Give me five, he texted back, and rose to put on his pretty clothes.

#  

Brian was waiting for him in the lot behind the hotel. He leaned back against the little Miata, the red of the car contrasting with the bright blue of his shirt.

He spotted Dom and grinned, the setting sun bronzing his face. As Dom got closer, he looked him up and down. “Did Mia help you pick out those clothes?”

Dom rolled his eyes. “Letty dictated what I’m allowed to wear to her wedding. Exactly how many
suits you think I brought with me?"

"Nah, man." Brian’s smile softened. "You look good."

Dom felt his mouth twist up into something like a smile. Infection, yeah. "We doin this?"

"We’re doing this."

The drive to Daisy’s was quiet, a little tense. Like the drive out to a race, almost. Brian broke the silence only once. "We’re going to have to play it by ear," he said. "Isay has a guard on staff at their house all the time, maybe more than one since Daisy’s having guests over. But once people start getting loose we should be able to move around a bit."

"You been there before?"

"Once. I didn’t have a chance to get away from Daisy and Marla, but I know where Isay’s office is. There’s a wing on the south side of the house, it has a den, a bar and kitchenette, his office, and then a door to his garden outside."

"His garden?" Dom felt his eyebrows go up.

"He grows roses." Brian shrugged. "Isay’s a weird guy, man. He’s got this walled-in garden full of roses and a greenhouse with orchids and shit. Daisy told me about it. No one’s allowed in without him, not even her. She’s only been in there when he was with her."

"Huh."

"Yeah."

They were quiet until Brian pulled up outside the house and parked, careful to pick a spot along the wide curving driveway that wasn’t blocked in by anyone else’s car. Most of the other cars on the drive matched Brian’s Miata: classic or new, they all had an expensive shine to them. German imports seemed pretty popular with this crowd: Audis, a couple candy-colored Minis, one Porsche. A little more than a dozen cars in total, which matched the size of the party they’d been expecting.

Brian turned to him. "So, look, I don’t know exactly how this is going to play out but I can promise to do my best not to kiss you again. I mean, I can’t guarantee how anything will go down, but—"

Dom breathed in through his nose, trying to play like that didn’t sting. "It’s fine."

"I can handle it," Brian insisted. "We shouldn’t need to do anything but look like we mostly tolerate each other’s presence."

"As long as you do handle it," Dom said. "I know what we’re here for. Do you?" He got out of the car and closed the door on Brian’s reply, annoyed. He could handle himself just fine.

As they walked up to the front door, it opened and two men, both in sharp black suits that made their pale features look vampiric, strode out, trailed by three more men in what Dom was coming to think of as the Bratva uniform: black canvas jacket, black jeans, black leather boots. Brian grabbed his arm and pulled him sharply to the side of the walkway, and the men strode down the steps in their direction.

"Isay." Brian spoke loudly enough to get the first man’s attention, which he looked annoyed about. He was a twitchy-looking dude; Dom wouldn’t love the idea of turning his back on him.

Isay’s polite smile was unconvincing, and the second man didn’t even slow down. Dom managed to think of as the Bratva uniform: black canvas jacket, black jeans, black leather boots. Brian grabbed his arm and pulled him sharply to the side of the walkway, and the men strode down the steps in their direction.

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Once all the men had piled in and the car disappeared down the driveway, Brian leaned into Dom’s side. "Daisy’s husband," he said quietly. "The guy with him was the vor’s son."

"Doing business on his wife’s birthday?"

Brian snorted. "Isay would invent business if it meant he didn’t have to be at this party. I’m surprised he was here at the house at all tonight."

It was almost enough to make Dom feel sorry for Daisy.

Inside, it was a blur of color and light and noise. Like Daisy, her house glittered and shone. Crystal chandeliers in the foyer, flower arrangements with white LED lights buried in the mix of white flowers, birch-pale wood floors, floor to ceiling windows. About fifteen women in cocktail dresses milled around in an open-plan sitting room that merged into a bar and then opened onto a broad deck ringed by high white stone walls to block out the neighbors. Music played over a hidden sound system, just loud enough to cover any awkward pauses in conversation. Not that there were many—these were Daisy’s friends, they knew each other and had plenty to talk about, especially considering the amount of alcohol being drunk.

Dom made his way past insincere hugs and greetings to the bar. No beer. To be expected.

He poured two highballs of rum and Coke, light on the rum, turned and surveyed the room. Even in the flattering, sparkly lighting, there was a certain creepy artificiality to the scene. He spotted
Brian leaning into a conversation with Daisy and Lise. That blue shirt made his skin glow in a way none of the lights could match because it was genuine, not the product of an interior designer considering angles and reflective surfaces. Compared to the heavily made-up women, Brian was a breath of fresh air. It was a weird thought, but it was true: Brian was the one thing in the room worth looking at.

Dom took a deep breath and dived into the fray.

An hour and a half into the party, most everyone was tipsy. Two women had overbalanced themselves into the hot tub, dresses still on, high heels scattered over the deck. Several others had turned the music up inside and were dancing, getting low and laughing at each other. Brian leaned back on his elbows against the deck railing, his face lit up from below by the LEDs twirled around the railing. Dom stood beside him, letting Brian worry about the conversation with Daisy—something about ways to get Isay to pay more attention to her when she was upset, which Dom privately thought was doomed. Isay was an asshole, and that wasn’t going to change just because Daisy changed her morning routine or her hair style. He kept his eye out for opportunities to slip away into the rest of the house, but they weren’t creating themselves and Brian wasn’t trying very hard to create one.

Maybe he was waiting for people to get a little drunker. But maybe, Dom thought impatiently, he was too worried about how Dom would react.

Brian turned away from the conversation and smiled at him. “Another drink?”

“Sure.”

Brian went to move away and, impulsively, Dom caught his arm and pulled him into a kiss. He meant it to be quick, just some kind of a thank-you peck for getting him a drink. But Brian didn’t pull away, and for the space of one heartbeat—two—they were kissing. It was strange, Dom thought even as he fell into it, because Brian was taller than he was. He’d tilted his head back into a kiss plenty of times. Letty used to love to climb him like a tree, tackle him onto a couch, pin him to the bed. But Brian was just swaying into him, pliant with surprise, and then pulling away, his eyes all lit up, teeth scraping his own bottom lip. Dom was acutely aware of his own body, the way he was standing, of his hand sliding down Brian’s arm to release him.

“That’s a yes on the rum and Coke, then,” Brian said, grinning, and turned away before Dom could think of anything clever to say back.

“Dominic,” Daisy said, drawling delightedly. “You and Brian are on, then. I’ve been wondering.”

Dom smiled politely, wishing he had timed this better—Brian had just walked away with his glass, he had nothing to do with his hands.

“You really like him, don’t you?” Lise chimed in.

“I mean, you two are so cute together,” Marla said.

“Brian would be cute with anyone,” Daisy said. “Of course, you’re hot too, Dominic. I’m just saying.”

“You can’t try to tell me you guys are only hooking up, though,” Lise said. “You like him.”

Dom hesitated. It was obvious that he was supposed to agree. But their intent gazes seemed to expect something more than just sure, whatever. He took a breath and dove into it, telling himself not to think too much. “He—you ever get on a highway and it’s just you and the road, no one else in the car, no other drivers around? No cops. And you’re driving—” he paused. “You’re in a really good car. And you just go. That’s—he makes me feel free.”

“That is the cutest thing I have ever heard,” Daisy declared.

“Ugh, I wish I was gay.” Lise pouted. “When gays are in love they just say it, out loud! With their words! Unlike some people.”

“What are we complaining about?” Brian rejoined them, handing Dom a drink and leaning against the railing up against his side.

“Men.” Daisy laughed.

“Ugh, men. They’re the worst.” Brian caught Dom’s eye, sparkling.

Dom took a long drink. The rum turned the soda sickly sweet, but it was better than nothing. His throat felt dry, his chest tight. Like he’d thought as soon as Lise asked how he felt, it was obvious. He was in love with Brian. His affection and loyalty and, yes, lust, for Brian was deeper and steadier than just about anything he’d ever felt.

He stared across the deck, barely seeing the women splashing in the hot tub. These feelings weren’t new, either. He could remember the first time he’d ever touched Brian, pulling him and Vince apart when they were fighting in the street in front of the deli. He could remember the hard heat of Brian’s chest under his palms as he pushed him away.

He’d felt it then, and it hadn’t gone away. He’d buried it, but. When he lost Brian the first time, he
was fucked up about it for so long. For months down in Mexico, he’d worked to bury it deep in hope that it would disappear and he’d never have to acknowledge it. Letty had left him, moved to Cuba and met Jacinto and now they were getting married, and he didn’t feel anything like this about it. He would always love Letty, but Christ. He’d been so fucked up about losing Brian. He’d felt so betrayed…

He knocked back the rest of his drink, letting the alcohol burn the back of his throat. Brain raised his eyebrows at him, but didn’t say anything.

So, he was in love. So what was he going to do about it, that was the question. Brian would walk away again, yeah—Brian was good at that, he thought bitterly, even though he knew that wasn’t fair. Dom had been the one to walk away from California, no matter that it had felt like Brian leaving him. The question was, was there anything he could do before the next time that happened. Or to stop that from happening. He was fucking terrified, his knees were just about shaking; there was nothing to do but close his eyes and bull forward into it before the fear swamped him.

He spun the empty glass in one hand and set it down on the deck railing. “Hey. Bri.” His voice came out dark and burred by the rum.

“Hmm?” Brian leaned into him, warm and inviting. Or appearing to be, Dom reminded himself. This body language was all a show. But he could use it to get Brian away from this crowd and figure out how much was true. Brian’s lies weren’t made up out of nothing.

“Come get another drink with me.”

Brian turned toward him, dropping the conversation with his girls immediately. “Yeah?”

“Ah.” Marla flapped a hand at them. “You’re awful, Dominic! I wish Brian had never run into you, you’re taking him away from us!”

Dom ignored her. The ball was in Brian’s court; he was the one who knew where they wanted to escape to, he’d have to lead the way.

“Yes.” Brian’s voice was low. “Let’s do that.” He took Dom’s hand, flashed a smile over his shoulder at the scoffing women, and led Dom through the party, past the bar to an alcove on the other side that branched into two hallways. Dom followed, feeling a little drunk, a little dazzled, a little like something important was happening: the high wire, the starting line. He was waiting for the flag to drop.

##

Brian pulled Dom up against him in the alcove, ducking his head into Dom’s neck as cover to glance around them and make sure they hadn’t caught the eye of anyone sober. And also because he wanted to: heat radiated off of Dom and it made Brian feel like a magnet seeking north. His heart was beating like he was on the edge of a cliff, like he was already falling. But he was a professional. “That was good,” he said, keeping his voice unemotional even as he wrapped a hand around the back of Dom’s neck and pulled his face close so it would look to any observer like they were making out.

“You know where the office is from here?” Dom whispered in his ear. It was good to hear how steady his voice was—it was a good reminder that he was faking his body language. Brian’s dick could just calm the fuck down.

“Yes.” Brian gave it a couple more beats, indulging himself, and then pushed off the wall and led Dom further down the south hallway. Their hands stayed linked; it would look better if someone caught sight of them, Brian told himself.

“This house is ridiculous,” Dom observed as they walked down the dim hallway, past four guest bedrooms and an open rec room, complete with pool table, couches arrayed around a giant television, and yet another minibar. “All this space just for two people.”

“Yes.” Brian slowly pushed a door open into a darkened room and peered inside. No luck: it was just a walk-in closet with coats hanging on one side, cardboard boxes stacked up against the back wall. “It would be nice if you actually had people to fill the space.”

“You’d need a ton of people. You’d need a whole team living together.”

“Yes,” Brian said absenty. “Maybe some kids thumping around—shit.” Footsteps sounded on the wood floor—solid boot soles, not just someone in high heels. He half-expected Dom to move away from him, to flinch away from actually making out as part of their cover. They’d said, but—the closet door was still open. Brian grabbed Dom’s arm and tugged.

Dom saw his plan immediately and rolled his eyes, but allowed himself to be pushed into the closet. It was smaller than Brian expected, and in order to get the door closed behind him he had to squeeze the both of them up to the towering stack of cardboard boxes that lined the back wall. In the dark, the closed door pressed at him on one side and Dom’s hot chest on the other. He hesitated to breathe.

“Hiding in a closet?” Dom sounded amused, but he shifted his weight slightly, like he was uncomfortable. Brian could feel it from his shoulders to his knees and all points between. “There’s a joke there.”
“Shut the fuck up,” Brian hissed.

Silence didn’t make it easier to cope. Dom knew how to be quiet, breathed so silently that Brian could barely hear him even pressed up close. He could feel Dom’s breath, though, tickling along his neck and collarbone. Brian could feel his control melting with the heat of Dom’s chest, just a couple layers of fabric away from his own skin.

The footsteps outside the door distracted him, passing by right outside the closet door, to the far end of the hall. Then silence. Brian couldn’t tell if the guard had turned the corner and continued, or paused. He breathed as shallowly as he could.

“So you were saying you want kids?” Dom whispered. Brian could only hear him because their faces were inches apart.

Brian choked on a laugh. This was so not the time. Down the hall, he heard a brief spit of words, sounding like a radio check-in although the actual words were muffled. Then the footsteps started again, coming back their way. “Quiet,” he breathed into Dom’s ear, barely as loud as his breath.

Dom’s hands settled on Brian’s waist, pulling him into his chest. Brian swallowed hard, suppressing his body’s reaction as best he could. Dom was rolling his shoulder, trying to get it away from something jabbing him in the back, that was all. He held himself still, breathing in the heat of Dom’s skin, feeling every square inch of his own skin lighting up like Christmas where Dom was touching him. He was getting hard, couldn’t help it, but that was almost secondary to the dizzy whirl in his head at Dom’s solid closeness.

“Think he’s gone?” Dom’s breath tickled his neck and it took Brian a long slow blink in the darkness to process the words.

Brian shrugged silently, using the movement to do his best to angle his semi away from Dom. There wasn’t a lot of space; Dom had to know how this was affecting him. Fuck.

They stood there for another couple of long, excruciating minutes, listening. Brian tried to breathe slowly, to settle his heartbeat. The adrenaline of almost getting caught wasn’t helping. Fuck, they could get shot in the head by Polzin’s goons and here he was panicking that Dom might be grossed out by touching him. So fucking stupid. And Dom’s hands were still on him.

After it had been quiet for several minutes, Brian turned the door handle and peered out, then slipped back out into the empty hallway. He expected Dom to pull away in relief as soon as he could, but as they made their way cautiously along the hallway, Dom held onto Brian’s elbow the whole way, keeping close.
Brian did his best to look as though he was trying doors in an attempt to find a room to fuck in as they made their way around the bend in the hallway to the south wing. It was a stupid ruse—they passed four rooms that would have done fine if that was really what they were looking for, five if he counted the darkened sunroom with low couches facing the wide southeastern windows, away from the door. But there was no sign of the guard they’d heard, and Dom didn’t pull his hand away from Brian’s.

Isay’s office was obvious, the only door that was closed and locked. Brian handed his lock picks over to Dom immediately and leaned against the door frame, blocking the handle from casual view.

“So,” he whispered as Dom went to work. “Do you want kids?”

Dom shot him a look, unreadable in the dim light. “I asked you first.”

Brian slipped inside the office as soon as the lock turned, looking around for anything electronic and fishing the drive out of his pocket. “Uh, I like the idea of kids,” he said, “with the right person, some day. The right person being someone who has some clue how to parent, because I sure as fuck don’t.”

Jackpot: not just a laptop, an entire desktop computer sat on a desk, a single green light blinking at the base. Brian found a slot on the tower and slipped the USB drive in until it clicked. A light on the drive blinked: the program was initiating.

Brian turned and found Dom right behind him, their faces inches apart. For one wild second he thought Dom was going to kiss him, just because he wanted to and not because anyone was watching.

“Yeah, me too,” Dom said. Kids, right. Why the hell were they even talking about this? Brian opened his mouth to say—he didn’t know what—when he heard a noise in the hallway almost right outside.

“Don’t freak out,” he hissed, and flipped their positions, pressing Dom’s hips against the desk. One hand on Dom’s jaw, he kissed him hard, going for it, letting his other hand grope southward so it would look realistic when—the door opened.

Zero to sixty. It was so fucking Brian that Dom almost didn’t register when the door opened. All his senses were swamped with the smell and heat of Brian’s body, the feel of his thumb pressing under Dom’s ear, his other hand sliding down Dom’s stomach to the front of his slacks, tucking fingertips into his waistband. Dom’s abs fluttered like he was nervous, like he was drowning.

But of course it was a ruse. A guard shone a light in on them, blinding Dom when he lifted his head to look at him.

“Who’s in there?” The guard was using a ‘talking to rich people’ voice; Dom wasn’t used to being on the receiving end of that tone. It didn’t really improve the experience of getting a flashlight to the face.

“Excuse me, sirs,” the guard repeated, and stepped into the office.

Brian pulled back and blinked at him, obviously doing his best to look drunk.

“This part of the house is closed this evening.”

Dom pushed off the desk, into Brian, but Brian didn’t step back and Dom just ended up pressed tightly against him.

“What?” Brian asked. He really did sound drunk.

“This part of the house is off-limits, sir.” The guard’s voice hardened. “And this room was locked. What are you doing in here?”

“What does it look like we’re doing in here?” Brian was turned toward the guard so Dom couldn’t see his face, but he could hear the cheeky smile in his voice. “Sorry if we’re not supposed to be in here, but it wasn’t locked.”

Brian was angled into the light strangely, his hips turned into Dom’s. He was making it look like they both had their dicks out, Dom realized, like they’d been farther along than a bare two seconds into a kiss. If the guard was the sort to be embarrassed by seeing an erection, Brian was doing him a favor. He didn’t want to be pressed against his hip was Brian’s cock, hot and hard. The thought of it, the feel of it even through layers of fabric, made Dom’s own dick fill. There was something unbearable about it, about knowing that Brian could feel his body responding to the adrenaline and closeness.

Dom breathed slowly and deliberately, refusing to gulp for air even though his lungs wanted to.

His face felt hot, but he kept his hands on Brian’s hips, kept looking at the guard like he dared him to start something.
“Look, could we have, uh, just a second?” Brian asked. “To, uh, get presentable.”

To Dom’s surprise, the guard wrinkled his nose with disgust and then stepped back into the hallway. “You have thirty seconds to button it up.”

Brian shifted his weight back just enough so that his cock wasn’t pressing up against Dom anymore. Dom fought the shiver of adrenaline backwash that rushed down his spine. There was something different about people looking at him and knowing that he wanted Brian, now that he’d admitted to himself that it was true. It made his skin crawl, like having that flashlight pointed at him. It felt like having a gun pointed at him. He cut his eyes toward the computer. “We good?” he whispered.

Brian held up a finger, waiting three long heartbeats as the drive blinked, blinked, and then stopped blinking, and then snatched the USB drive out of the computer, sliding it back into his pocket as he patted himself down, ending up looking more disheveled than when he started.

“Now we’re good.”

Dom nodded, took a deep breath, and followed Brian back out into the hallway. He rolled his shoulders back, ready for a fight. The guard had a gun on his waist, but he clearly was buying their cover story. He wouldn’t be expecting to get jumped.

Brian reached back and held onto Dom’s wrist, anchoring him. “You’re such a buzzkill, man,” he complained, sounding tipsy and nonthreatening.

“Yeah, and I’m about to be worse.” The guard still looked disgusted with them. Dom throttled back on the itch to punch him in the face. If it was anyone else, anywhere else, looking at him like that…but the job meant they had to be meek.

“Worse?” Brian’s fingers tightened on Dom’s wrist, but his voice was the same, drunk and silly, almost flirty. “I promise we’ve learned our lesson.”

“Come with me.” The guard gestured for them to walk in front of him, and he had a hand on his gun. Dom was pretty sure he could take him still; he had that look of a man who didn’t really want to fight. But the job.

Brian caught his eye and then obeyed, walking down the hall and pulling Dom along with him. Once he’d taken a few steps he let go of Dom’s wrist, so they’d both have their hands free. Dom tried not to think about how it left his skin feeling cold where Brian’s fingers had been. “What’s up, man? Where are we going?” Brian looked over his shoulder at the guard. “It’s a party, why are you freaking out?”

“It’s my job,” the guard said grimly. “I have to report intruders and unlocked doors.”

Dom caught Brian’s eye, wondering if it was time to bug out, but Brian flickered a hint of a wink at him and Dom settled. He could follow Brian’s lead. Brian had the fucking training for this anyway. Brian—was leaning to the side, leaning into Dom’s shoulder like he was drunk and carefree and not taking this seriously.

He couldn’t help calculating the chances that the guard was going to turn out to be more nervous than he could handle, or more disgusted by a couple of faggots, and put a bullet into him or Brian. He glanced behind him; the guard had his gun in his hand now, and the hallway seemed twice as long as it had walking up it.

Finally they turned a corner he and Brian hadn’t explored, past a glass door that led outside into the dark, and then into a room off the second hallway. It was the security room, of course: in one look Dom saw utilitarian metal shelves, an array of security camera screens, and a desk with some kind of console that probably handled remote access to various parts of the house. More importantly, two more men in black fatigues waited for them, one sitting at the desk and one standing next to him. They’d been waiting, Dom saw with a sinking stomach. The guard who was standing on the left had a taser in one hand.

“Oh my god, this is like, a big deal, isn’t it?” Dom hadn’t thought Brian’s gay playboy persona could sound more vapid, but now he sounded like his IQ had just dropped twenty points. Dom kept his own mouth shut; his instinct for how to play this was obviously not the way Brian wanted to do it.

“How did you get in that room where Nabokov found you?” Taser’s accent was fresh from Moscow, which made Dom even unhappier.

“The door was open?” Brian looked around helplessly. “We were just looking for—” he cut himself off like he was just now realizing that these guys weren’t fond of gay dudes.

He knows what he’s doing, Dom reminded himself. Trust him. He reached for Brian’s belt loop and reeled himself in closer—leaving Brian’s hands free but making Dom himself seem smaller, more gentle. And, most importantly, putting Dom’s body between Brian and the guard who’d found them, who still held a gun to their backs. If he was doing this Brian’s way, he wasn’t going to be stupid about it.


“We should call the boss,” the guard at the desk said. “Mr. Mozhayev would want to know about
the security breach.”

“Just a couple of—” the guard who’d caught them cut himself off and Dom had to grind his teeth together to keep from glaring at the guy.

“I swear the door was unlocked,” Brian said, not a hint of defiance in his voice. Dom didn’t know how he did it. “We didn’t mean to, like, make a problem for you guys.”

They went back and forth, Brian maintaining their innocence and ignorance. It was the right play, not trying to explain too much. Dom tried not to grind his teeth in spite of how helpless he felt. His skin crawled. If they searched Brian and found the drive, they were both seriously fucked. And all three guards looked at him and Brian like they weren’t even men, like they were tempted to shoot them both just for being—

“Daisy’s probably looking for us by now,” Dom said in Brian’s ear, quietly but loud enough for the guards to hear.

“Oh, she is going to kill me. Please,” he asked the guard, “you’ve got to not tell her about this. It’s her birthday, she’ll be so pissed if I cause a scene.”

“Especially a scene that isn’t about her,” Dom said, hoping…and the guards laughed, relaxing a little. A noise behind him was the first guard putting his gun back in the holster.

He didn’t relax until two of the guards finally escorted them back to the edge of the lit up area of the house. “Look, you know which parts of the house you can be in and which you can’t. I don’t want to see the two of you again,” the first guard said paternalistically. Dom’s hands clenched into fists behind his back where the guard couldn’t see them. “If you two really can’t keep your hands off each other, there are a couple spare bedrooms near the bathroom.”

“Oh or you could go back to your own clubs or an alley or wherever you usually—” the second guard broke off, licking his teeth like he’d discovered a bad taste in his mouth.

Before Dom could grind out a furious reply, Brian smiled sunnily. It was a fighting kind of smile, and Dom’s stomach dropped a second before Brian said, “Alleys are always covered in broken glass and you know that’s hard on my knees, honey.”

The guard scowled furiously and for a second Dom thought they really were going to get fucked up, but then the first guard grabbed Brian’s arm and pulled him away, cutting a look back at them before he turned the corner. He was going to be watching them on the security cameras all night, Dom thought. It made it hard to know how to act natural, with Brian looking at him and cameras that could be anywhere. None of this was how he was used to doing things.

“Come on,” Brian said, eyes glittering, and grabbed Dom’s wrist again. Dom followed, unresisting, mind spinning. Brian didn’t stop until they reached the empty guest bedroom, and then he pulled Dom in and closed the door behind them. “We did it.” He grinned.

They’d kissed how many times now? In the pool, out on the porch. And whatever that was in Isay’s office, it was Brian building a story to cover why they were there but it was also—it was a kiss and it felt right, and they’d both gotten hard—that was a reaction, maybe just to adrenaline or friction but maybe not—and the way Brian was smiling, heart wide open as freefall.

And Brian was bi, Dom thought. He wasn’t lying about that. Brian was bi and he liked touching Dom and there was a chance… He didn’t even know what he was thinking but he reached out, very deliberately, with the hand Brian wasn’t holding, and slid his fingers into Brian’s curls, around the curve of his skull. The words caught on the tip of his tongue: when you win a race, there are some traditional ways to celebrate. Or: that guard already thinks we’re fucking in here so we might as well. Or: tell me you want this.

But Brian beat him to it. “I know I promised I wouldn’t kiss you again, but in my defense it worked perfectly.”

Dom tightened his fingers and shook Brian just a little.

Brian grinned wider and swayed into him. Their hips bumped together, repeating their posture from the encounter in the office. Dom’s erection had flagged to nothing almost as soon as the guard showed up but the renewed contact was delicious. His attention spiraled down to the points where he and Brian were in contact: his hand in Brian’s hair, their hips bumping together, Brian’s breath close enough to smell the rum. Brian’s hands settled on Dom’s waist, pulling them closer together.

This was what he wanted. It was obvious inside his own head, but to admit it in the moment, even to himself, made him feel dizzy. His breath came short, either from lust or from fear. The thrill of fear in his stomach was impossible to deny—he wasn’t sure he could articulate why this felt so dangerous, but it did. It felt more dangerous than being held at gunpoint. But somehow that made it sweeter. Doing crazy dangerous shit with Brian was the way he wanted to die, he decided. His mouth was dry; he licked his bottom lip and thought about leaning forward and licking his way into Brian’s mouth.

Brian beat him to it, lunging forward and taking Dom’s mouth, flooding his body with contact like
a wave of warmth and pleasure. Pressed between Brian and the door at his back, Dom’s mind skipped around helplessly. It was strange kissing someone taller than him, he thought again, although height wasn’t all of it: Brian was just—there was so much of him. He was so alive, so full of movement and joy and mischief, his big hands spanning a ridiculous amount of Dom’s waist and his fingertips clutching greedily. Dom had never thought—he’d thought he was done wanting this. He rolled his hips up into Brian’s, his own hard cock trapped against Brian’s hip, Brian’s cock hot and hard angled against Dom’s belly.

That was…he’d wanted honesty from Brian. This was about as nakedly, agonizingly honest as it got, this admitting, this weakness, this wanting. This was his now. Dom ran his hands up Brian’s back, feeling the muscles flex.

Brian bit at Dom’s lip. “Fuck. Dom, I—”

Anything, Dom didn’t say it. Instead he slid his hands down Brian’s sides, slipped one hand between them and groped Brian’s ass with the other. The button on Brian’s jeans gave it up, nice and easy, and the zipper practically unzipped itself, Brian’s cock was pressing on it so hard.

A part of Dom’s mind was very still and far away, but he ignored it. His own cock was throbbing, but he ignored that too. Brian’s cock fit perfectly in his hand, red and blood-hot. Dom slid his hand along it experimentally, tightening his grip until he worked a low moan out of Brian.

“I didn’t think you—”

“You don’t think I know how to drive stick?” Somehow Dom’s voice came out steady, full of bravado he didn’t actually feel.

Brian chuckle cut off into a moan when Dom stroked Brian’s cock again. He was so out of practice that it was like he’d never learned; the angle was different than jerking off, awkward. But Brian was incredibly responsive, panting and moaning and clutching at Dom’s shoulder and neck, which made it easier to figure out how he liked it. This was—fuck. Dom’s own breath was coming fast and hard, his other hand kneading at Brian’s muscular ass what must be hard enough to hurt but he couldn’t seem to stop.

He couldn’t think at all, could only see Brian’s open mouth, the flush that spread down his neck, the bow of his stomach as he leaned into Dom, desperate for as much touch as he could get. Brian’s skin was sticky with a light layer of sweat. His cock—his cock, in Dom’s hand, as alive and moving as the rest of him, the head wet and glistening. Dom wanted to bend down and lick the taste of the skin right under his jaw. It was fucking glorious, the low light on Brian’s skin making him glow golden like a sunrise.

“God, you’re beautiful,” Dom gasped out, not thinking. “I want—Bri—” He sounded stupid as shit but then Brian was jerking against him, hips taut, and then spurting come all over Dom’s hand.

“Fuck. Fuck.” Brian sagged against Dom’s chest, his mouth open wetly against Dom’s throat but not biting down. “Oh shit. Give me a second.”

Dom glanced around for something to wipe his hand off on that wasn’t his shirt or Brian’s. There—he spotted a box of tissues and gently pushed away from Brian to snatch up a couple. There was come in the webbing between his fingers, warm and sticky. He was strongly of two minds about that—it was disgusting, and he wanted to taste it, he moved his hand faster, hungry for the noises Brian was making, hungry for the taste of the skin right under his jaw. It was fucking glorious, the low light on Brian’s skin making him glow golden like a sunrise.

Dom glanced around for something to wipe his hand off on that wasn’t his shirt or Brian’s. There—he spotted a box of tissues and gently pushed away from Brian to snatch up a couple. There was come in the webbing between his fingers, warm and sticky. He was strongly of two minds about that—it was disgusting, and he wanted to taste it, which—he tilted his head down, looking at his hands so Brian wouldn’t see the conflict on his face. It wasn’t Brian’s fault that he was all fucked up about what he wanted.

“Dom. That was—” Brian broke off and then started again. “I didn’t think… thanks for not murdering me. I got you into this and I know it’s not your scene but I swear I’m happy to make it up to you. Anything you want.” There was humor in his voice and Dom looked up, not quite tracking what he was saying. His hands were clean now; when Brian swayed into him, it was only natural to sink both hands in Brian’s hair, not quite pulling.

“It’s not fair of me to get you into this bullshit and then not follow through with it,” Brian said lightly, reaching for Dom’s fly and then starting to sink to his knees.

“Dom felt obligated. Dom’s stomach imploded into a tight, cold knot. Frozen, stupidly, he didn’t let go of Brian’s hair until it pulled at his fingers. Then he let go entirely and stepped sideways, away from Brian and the bed and the wall at his back. “I thought you promised not to lie to me again,” he said. Brian was still smiling lazily, and apparently he liked handjobs, but that didn’t mean he wanted Dom. A sharp sick feeling started to roll in Dom’s gut.

Brian blinked back surprise at Dom’s reaction, made himself stay relaxed, easy—bracing for the fall only left you with bruises and broken bones. He’d only meant to give Dom plausible deniability, selfishly lunging at the chance to get his mouth on Dom without having to face the pathetness of his own willingness to be just—a mouth, a hole, interchangeable with any of the girls Dom fucked and forgot about. But he’d miscalculated something, and by the look on Dom’s face he’d miscalculated it badly. He straightened slowly, keeping his hands at his sides instead of crossing them protectively over his chest like he was vaguely aware that he wanted to. Better not to think about what he wanted right now—that was in some distant location, hard to identify.

Easier, and more useful, to watch Dom’s face and adjust.
“Aight, man,” he said. “No worries.”

He backed away and sat down on the bed. Not the best tactic, maybe—something about the offer of a blowjob had freaked Dom right out, and while he wasn’t sure what, better to stay away from things associated with sex. But there was nowhere else to sit in the room and sitting down put Dom at the advantage, physically. He was hoping that would make him more comfortable.

Not that it seemed to matter much one way or the other. Dom turned away from him, shoulders bunching and flexing with tension. Brian was almost afraid he was going to split the seams of his shirt.

The silence clung thickly to the room. Brian picked at the bedspread, the tension spinning out and spinning out until he felt like he was going to puke. He couldn’t think.

His hands moved automatically, nervously, and pulled out his phone, which was blinking with a text from Kumiko.

“Hey, Kumiko’s in.” He held up the phone, but Dom didn’t glance over. “The program sent her an alert or something, so she’s starting work right now.”

“Do we bug out?”

“Nah.” Brian glanced at the time. Just past midnight. “Let’s give it another half an hour at least, make the rounds again. We don’t want to give them a running target, you know?”

Dom grunted.

“I—I really am sorry, man.” He needed to unfuck all this tension. “I was just kidding around. I know—”

Dom interrupted him with a sharp gesture. “Do you know?”

He seemed to mean something specific. Brian bit his tongue, uncertain, and shook his head slightly.

“You know I was in Lompoc.”

Brian nodded.

“But you don’t know what it was like. You have this idea in your head, I think, that says guys like me are on the top of the food chain in there, ‘cause I’m light-skinned and work out and I’m not afraid to get my hands a little bloody.”

Brian would put Dom’s charisma right at the top of that list of reasons, but, yes, basically. He knew better than to agree, though. He was pretty sure he didn’t want to hear where this was going.

“What you don’t know is that no con is at the top of the food chain. I went in, I was nineteen years old. And there was this CO…” Dom hesitated for so long that Brian thought maybe that was it, that was all he was going to say. Then he spit it out. “He used to get you one on one, make you pretend like you wanted to suck him off. People who didn’t, he’d write them up, get them sent to the hole. I heard he even got one guy charged with assaulting an officer. So if you didn’t want another year or three on your bid, you’d damn well pretend.”

Brian swallowed hard. He felt like he might be sick. He had a flash of memory, of putting bullets in Johnny Tran after he killed Jesse and not feeling bad about it. He hadn’t felt much bad about it since, either. Some people deserved a bullet. “No wonder you fucking hate cops,” he said eventually.

Dom snorted, almost laughing. “Believe me, I hated cops before I ever went inside.”

“I didn’t know. All I knew was how many years you’d done, what you told me about Linder. I, um, they showed me pictures of Linder, from the hospital,” he admitted. He wouldn’t lie, not right now. “My boss did. But I didn’t know anything happened to you inside.”

Dom’s face twisted. “Man, something happens to everyone inside. What happened to me wasn’t even that bad. CO Ward only got a hold of me four, five times. Then he got promoted and sent off to some other prison.” He laughed humorlessly.

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Dom snorted, almost laughing. “Believe me, I hated cops before I ever went inside.”

“Yeah, man,” he said. “No worries.”
“I’m not freaking out because you—kissed me.” Rubbed off on me. Seemed like Dom couldn’t say it either. He waved vaguely in the direction of the floor. “I’m explaining why I would never make you…”

Brian blinked. If Dom meant—but that didn’t make it less Brian’s fault. He’d fucked up, big time, and he’d done it entirely unforced. It was time to salvage what he could here, starting with making sure Dom knew this clusterfuck wasn’t his fault. He made himself smile cheerfully. “If you think I’m afraid of you, Toretto, you’re a bigger idiot than I am.”

Dom shrugged restlessly, but he cracked an unconvincing smile.

“Look.” Brian stood up, blanking out his mind the way he needed to, to get the job done. “I am an idiot, and I’m sorry. We have a job to do—can we start over?” He held out both his hands. Dom stepped forward into his grasp immediately, which was a good sign. They’d be able to get their good body language back; working with Dom was always perfect even when they were hurting each other.

“Why are we holding hands, O’Conner?” Dom’s voice was dry.

Brian tightened his fingers. “It’s a technique for getting body language to mesh.”

Dom grunted, but accepted it, standing with both their hands entwined between them. He relaxed gradually. Brian had a vision of running his hands up Dom’s arms, over his shoulders, massaging out that tension that sparked through Dom’s muscles. To touch, to have all that power warm and relaxed underneath him, murmuring little incoherent pleasures… he swallowed it down, blinked himself back to the present moment. He could never ever have that, he knew that now. Dom knew about Miller, he knew Brian was—was no good. He would never want—it wasn’t the time to be thinking about it. “You good?”

“Are you?” Dom’s gaze was challenging but not unfriendly.

Brian nodded, shoving away everything that was actually making him feel like he was dying. “Yeah. Let’s go finish this.”
Chapter 12

The party was roaring when they wandered back in, doing their best to look like the kind of put together that was the result of a minute of restoring order to an appearance recently ruffled by illicit sex in a guest bedroom. Brian managed it, of course: his hair was fucking sinful. Dom suspected that he himself looked more shaken than satiated—telling Brian about his bullshit had left him feeling gutted—but Daisy and her girls were drunk enough not to notice.

“How long we staying?” He leaned in close to Brian’s ear so they wouldn’t be overheard.

Brian looked around the room and Dom followed his gaze. Music still played loudly over the speakers, but no one was dancing anymore. Clumps of people sat on the couches that divided up the indoor space, or on the edge of the hot tub outside, talking and laughing. Half a dozen people would have welcomed Brian into their conversations because they knew and liked him, and the rest would have welcomed him based solely on how pretty he was, Dom figured. Especially since there were no other men at the party, just him and Brian and the guards. In another life he would have been thrilled to party with this many beautiful women, but all things considered it just seemed strange. Off. A reminder of how off he himself was right now.

“Just a few minutes.” Brian snagged two glasses of something pale off the minibar and drifted toward the deck. Dom followed, tasting his drink: some combination of lemonade and vodka, and maybe moscato. It was sweet, almost sickly.

“Briaaaan!” Daisy tottered through the open doors toward him. Dom was impressed that she could stay upright on those stilettos.

“Hey, girl.”

“I think I drunk too much.” Her words were slurred. Dom’s stomach twisted in sympathy.

“It’s your birthday, you can drink as much as you want to.” Brian put his arm around her, half holding her up.

“It is my birthday!” Daisy chirped, eyelids half closed.

“That’s the spirit.” Brian caught Dom’s eye and smiled ruefully.

“You’re a good friend.” Daisy leaned more heavily into him. “I’m glad you came to my party. Even if you did sneak off to have sex instead of dancing with me.”

Dom watched Brian usher Daisy to a seat on the low couch that divided up the open space. She draped herself over the cushions, so drunk that Dom bet that she wouldn’t remember any of this tomorrow. Brian patted her hair affectionately and sat down beside her, motioning Dom to sit too.

Would he miss her when they all disappeared out of Vegas? Dom wondered. Brian seemed to genuinely like her, but then most of the time Brian seemed to genuinely like Dom. Impossible to say for sure. Brian was a brilliant liar. He wasn’t always faking, and he built his untruths out of truth—truth sectioned and flipped and upside-down, but still reality. But what that meant, Dom didn’t know. He’d thought he knew, but.

It seemed like Brian really did like being friends with Daisy. But he was fine with stealing from her and her husband. It made Dom’s heart hurt when he thought about it, so he pushed the thought away.

“I’m glad you two are back together,” Daisy said, clumsily patting at Brian’s knee. “You deserve to be happy.”

Brian glanced over at Dom, his face blank. Dom looked back, one eyebrow raised: Brian was the one who’d been lying to Daisy for months. Dom wasn’t about to rescue him.

“You deserve to be happy, too,” Brian finally said. “I hope you are. I hope thirty-one is the best year you’ve ever had.”

“Shut up, I’m not thirty-one!”

Brian laughed. “Yes, you are, girl. Don’t pretend like you’re still twenty-four when I know the truth.”

“Fine.” She huffed and fell silent.

Dom set his lemonade down on a side table. It was too sweet to drink.

“Hey, we’re going to take off,” Brian said. “You’re wasted, and my boy here needs his beauty sleep.”

“Your boy.” Daisy said it like it was the most adorable thing she’d ever heard. “I’m going to miss you, Bri.”

“What?” Brian cocked his head. A stab of fear pulled Dom out of his self-pity. Did Daisy know something? He had a vision of Bratva footsoldiers, black clothing and black assault rifles, striding into the party to march him and Brian away.
“People leave Vegas. You think I don’t know that? Even us, even my husband’s people. Loyalties change, power shifts. There’s been a lot of big black cars driving these streets.” She glanced up and caught Brian’s facial expression. “Oh honey, don’t worry. I’m not saying anything bad is going to happen to you! It’s not you I’m worried about,” she added darkly.

“Are you worried that something might happen to you? Girl.” Brian sounded naïve, not barely worried, but the look on his face was sharp.

Daisy didn’t answer.

Dom leaned forward and asked quietly, “Have you seen something that scared you?”

She gave a small smile and shook her head, but Dom didn’t believe her. Brian didn’t either, because he pressed one of her hands between both of his and said, “Daisy, honey, this year is going to be your best year. And if it isn’t, you know my number.”

She smiled and rolled her eyes at him. “I’m not worried about me either. Don’t be such a drag.”

“Well, fine.” Brian cocked his head, sassy and very gay. “I’m taking my boy home then. Best birthday hangover to you, missy.”

He rose and Dom followed him. They made their way out of the house, Brian leaning on Dom’s arm like he was drunker than he really was, covering his glances around them by tilting his head into Dom’s shoulder. The places where they touched were warm and powerfully comforting in a way that Dom didn’t want to think about. It was like being burned, except instead of pain he felt a physical kind of joy that hurt only because he knew he couldn’t keep it. This walk out to the car, this was the last moment they would have any reason to pretend to be together. This was it; from here on out he had no idea what he was going to do. He wrapped his arm around Brian’s waist and leaned into it.

As they reached the car, Brian fished his keys out of his pocket and handed them to Dom. “I’m too drunk. Drive me?”

Dom raised his eyebrows. There was no way Brian was drunk at all—he’d barely touched his last drink, only used it as a prop, and before that his drinks had been mostly soda. Brian flicked his eyes toward the corner of the Mozhayev house. Someone must be watching them. Dom took the keys. “You’ll let me drive your car,” he said skeptically.

“I trust you not to hurt her,” Brian said.

Dom blinked at him, shook his head, and faked helping Brian into the passenger seat, letting his fingers slide down Brian’s forearm one last time before he closed the door. Brian didn’t mean that the way it sounded, he told himself. He just didn’t care about this Miata; it was part of his cover, and that cover was just about all used up. It was nothing. Still, he couldn’t help but feel warm all the way through.

As soon as they pulled out of the gated community and onto the main road, Brian straightened up in his seat and pulled out his phone. “Kumiko’s got a shit ton of info,” he said, flicking through pages of email. The flirtiness was completely gone from his voice; Dom didn’t look at him. “Looks like the most important bit is that she’s found the schedule for moving their ‘recruits’ and the next van is leaving at seven tomorrow evening. So, assuming our people are on it…” he paused, scrolling through the texts on his phone. “Yeah, she says that they don’t refer to anyone by name in any of their records, but it looks like this is the first movement of trafficked people in two weeks, so it’s got to be our people. She’s alerted everyone, including Mrs. Perez and Mrs. Garcia, and we’re all going to have breakfast together tomorrow at eight. There’s an address for a diner.”

“Sounds like Kumiko is in charge of this,” Dom commented.

Brian shrugged. “She coordinates information.”

“As long as she doesn’t try to tell us how to run a hijacking.”

“She won’t.”

Dom pulled to a stop outside the front of the Mirage. There was no reason to ask Brian to come up, but he almost did anyway. He wanted to. But no, it would be awkward and weird. Better to give him some space so they could both adjust back to normal.

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They switched seats; Dom watched Brian drive away before he stepped through the doors into the perpetual noise and color of the casino floor.

He felt strange in his skin, unsettled still from the encounter with Brian. Encounter—he didn’t know what else to call it. They hadn’t fucked, but they’d hooked up, and the fucked up thing was that that wasn’t even what had him all turned around.

Or, it wasn't the only thing. He was fucking miserable, but there were so many reasons for it, as soon as his thoughts focused on one thing—hooking up with a dude, Brian not wanting him, fucking Lompoc—the other things kind of faded back. It was the strangeness of the situation,
maybe, distorting his thinking. Making the past dwindle into flat, faded memories, making it hard to worry about the future.

Instead of retreating to his own hotel room, he found himself wandering down the hall to Mia’s door and knocking. She didn’t answer right away and he thought to check the time. Past one a.m. He winced. She was probably sleeping, and wouldn’t appreciate being woken up.

Just as he moved away from the door, it opened. “Dom?” Mia poked her head out, wrapped in a hoodie over flimsy pajamas. “Everything OK?”

He bit his lip. “Yeah. Sorry for waking you up.”

“It’s fine.” She squinted at him. “Come in.”

He hesitated. “Really, you should sleep.”

Mia turned and walked into her room, leaving the door open behind her. Dom had to follow her in or shut the door on her, rudely.

She waved him to the single armchair that furnished the room and sat cross-legged on the bed. The air was turned down too cold, and she had an extra blanket on her bed, which seemed heavy and uncomfortable to him. Maybe it was a pregnancy thing. That was a weird thought.

Mia wrapped the extra blanket around her shoulders. “I wanted to talk to you.” She tossed something at him and he caught it—her phone. “Samson texted me, finally.”

Dom opened up the phone’s text menu:

*I don’t really have time to get too involved with anyone*

*D you’re really cool and sweet but*

*you deserve someone who can spend the time*

*I’m so sorry but I don’t want to string you along*

“He looked up at Mia. She didn’t seem upset about it. “At least he wasn’t an asshole about it?”

“You mean other than taking, like, a week to tell me that? I guess.” Mia made a face.

“You OK?”

She sighed. “I think so. He was never gonna be the one, you know? Too interested in being respectable.”

“You deserve someone respectable,” Dom protested. “He’s the one not good enough for you, if he’s not the kind of person to make time.”

Mia smiled. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, hermano, but I don’t always hang around people who, you know, stop at red lights. Fuck, you’re involved in a major con right now, we’re planning a hijacking—”

“For a good cause,” Dom pointed out.

“I’m just saying, I don’t think he and I were forever or anything.” She smirked. “Though the sex was good.”

“Ugh.” Dom wrinkled his nose. “Don’t tell me that.”

After a moment, Mia’s shoulders slumped. “It does suck, though.”

“He doesn’t know about the…” Dom trailed off.

“The baby? No.”

“Are you going to tell him?”

Mia shrugged, picking at the quilt beside her foot. “He doesn’t really have the time to get involved right now, didn’t you see?”

Dom studied her. “That sounds like you don’t want to keep it.”

“Can you imagine what mom would say? Her daughter, raising a baby out of wedlock?” Mia raised a fist in imitation, “‘¿Mi hija? ¡Nunca en mi casa! ¡Si quieres ser una putana, vete!’ Of course, if I had an abortion, she’d have a stroke.”

“She would scream at you for a day,” Dom said. “And then she would realize that if you had a baby, she’d have a grandkid.”

“And then forget whatever the neighbors said?” Mia laughed. “Maybe.”

“She loved you. She would want you to be happy. Dad too.”
Mia shrugged and they sat in silence for a minute. It was nice to have something to distract him from the mess with Brian. A thought occurred to him. “Do you need to, I don’t know, go to a clinic or something?”

“If I want to have an abortion, yeah.”

“No, I mean…” Dom trailed off. He didn’t actually know a lot about what was required during a pregnancy. “Do you need a checkup? Do you know how far along you are?”

“Oh, I know.” Mia glittered with smugness. “I remember very distinctly the night it must’ve been.”

Dom winced. “Please don’t tell me. I’m going to keep believing this was an immaculate conception.”

Mia laughed, then sobered. “I think I’m going to wait until I get back to LA. I feel fine, and I’m only about eight weeks along. And I think…” she trailed off and then rallied. “If I keep it, I’m going to want a doctor I like, and I want to see the same one the whole time.”

“That sounds like you want to keep it.”

Mia gave him a small smile. “Lo estoy considerando.”

“De verdad?” He grinned at her.

“I mean, I haven’t decided, but…” she bobbed her head. “I kind of like the idea. I just need to figure out if I can afford it.”

“Hey, I told you I’d knock over a liquor store if you need cash.” A baby. The thought made him feel… the Toretto family could stand to have some good luck, finally. A tiny little Mia running around—he grinned.

“There will be no holdups of any kind,” Mia said severely. “My student insurance should cover the prenatal stuff. I just need to figure out everything a little farther ahead than that. I don’t know.”

“Look at me, Mia.” He held her gaze. “Anything I can do. I mean anything. You want me to move back to LA and be your nanny, I can get a better ID.”

She laughed. “My nanny? I don’t know if I’ll be that desperate.”

“I mean it, though. I do remember that family is the most important thing.” He looked at the ground. “I know I’ve fucked up, and our family’s been hurt by it.”

“Yeah, you have.” Mia’s voice was soft. “I’m not sure mom and dad would be proud of either of us. But we keep driving forward.”

He looked up and saw her smiling at him. “Yeah. Can’t go backward, I guess.”

“What about you? Rough night? You don’t usually come knocking on my door looking for girl talk.”

Dom winced. Speaking of his fuck ups. That was an aspect of this bullshit with Brian that he hadn’t had time to consider, how other people would view him if they found out. He would lose respect, friendship. Cooperation would dry up. If people thought—knew—he was fucking a dude, would they trust him to run jobs? Would they race him? Would they send him to sit with the girls on the sidelines? Maybe he could get a gig as a flag girl, waving racers off and choking on their exhaust.

Good thing Brian had zero interest in actually getting involved, especially not now that Dom had told him. Dom would never have to worry about looking like a pussy at races.

“Oh no.” Mia got up and poured herself a glass of gin, neat, from the bottle on the dresser. No, not for herself: she handed it to him. Dom made a face at the gin, but drank it. He’d had enough alcohol earlier that a couple fingers of gin might actually have an effect on him.

“I’m not a faggot.” He rolled the empty glass between his palms.

“Oooookay.” Mia made a face. “You know, if Vince was the one using that word I’d give him a lecture. Can you just say gay?”

“Fine. I’m not gay.”

“I feel like there’s a ‘but’ coming here.” She frowned. “Did something happen when you were at the Bratva thing?”

Dom swallowed. The gin had dried out his mouth and the alcohol wasn’t actually helping him get his thoughts together. He’d already peeled back his skin once tonight. Maybe it wasn’t time to have this particular conversation.

“OK, let me see if I can interpret this tortured silence: you want Brian, but you’re too manly to admit it.”

His sister always had been sharp as a knife. “It’s not that simple.”
“Mm.” Mia wrapped the blanket more firmly around herself. “You know, I saw you two together just yesterday, and I know what I saw. But I guess I don’t know what it’s like to be too manly to admit something. Especially if you’re a grown-ass man suddenly discovering you’re not a hundred percent straight. I can see how that would be confusing and surprising.”

His stomach tangled painfully, gross as his sweating hands. Dom thought he was keeping his face and body language perfectly still, not giving away the fear, but Mia must have caught some tiny expression on his face, because she sat forward. “Wait. Dom. Are you—”

“It’s—” He took a break, then forced out: “It’s not that surprising.”

He felt like he’d just confessed to a murder. He could think of murders he could commit that it would be easier to confess to. He knew rationally that Mia wouldn’t disown him, but it was hard to calm his racing heartbeat. The blood pounded in his throat, his temples, his chest. He rose and filled the glass with more gin, banging the bottle against the top of the dresser when he set it down.

Mia waited patiently for him to turn around. “Are you coming out to me to make me feel better about being pregnant out of wedlock?”

“What?” Dom stared at her, and then laughed unhappy, tension punctured. “Christ, Mia.”

“I know, right?” Mia was laughing too. “So you’re not surprised that you could be into dudes. Or at least this one particular dude. Are you guys, like, a couple now?”

Dom snorted and shook his head. “It’s not like that. Pretending to be with him, for the con, means that we’ve had to… kiss. A couple of times.”

“And now you want more.”

“It’s only for the con, Mia. He, uh, he doesn’t know that I—might be interested. In anything.”

“Well, then obviously you’ve got to talk to him. The jacking and the wedding are tomorrow. You’re going to run out of time.”

Dom screwed up his face. “I can’t—it’s not like I could just… date him.”

“What?”

He didn’t know how to explain without sounding like a coward. He felt like a coward. “I just can’t. Dudes can’t just—everyone would think we were—”

“Whatever. Since when have you ever run into a rule and thought, ‘oh yeah, I’ll definitely obey that, that seems like a great idea?’”

She had a point but he wasn’t about to admit it. “I mean I can’t just—ask him out. We don’t even live in the same country.”

“Dom.” Mia leaned forward and looked him in the eye. “I’m going to say this and you’re going to listen to me, OK? Brian is one of us. He belongs with our team. I know it; you know it. I’m pretty sure he knows it, and if he doesn’t we’ll educate him.”

Dom grunted. Nothing was ever that simple—Mia didn’t know about Lompoc. He’d never told a soul what happened in Lompoc, before tonight. So obviously Mia didn’t realize that now that Brian knew where Dom’s mouth had been he would never even consider—but it was a nice thought.

##

Kumiko was sitting at the table in the kitchen when Brian got back to the house, her tablets lighting up her face with a white-blue electronic glow, phone to her ear. She was chattering away in Japanese—probably with her brother, at university in Tokyo or somewhere. They were always on the phone together at weird times due to the time difference and Kumiko being a bossy older sister. That was what it sounded like, anyway, based on her tone of voice.

Kumiko blinked at him and interrupted her conversation with, “You look like a drunk slut.” She said a few more sentences into the phone and hung up.

Brian blinked at her, the words barely registering. He was just starting to feel the impact of the evening, the emotions looming over him like a landslide. Still half-drunk, his denial about the enormity of his fuckup tonight was starting to fray, and he needed to get some privacy before he couldn’t avoid feeling it. “Thanks. You too.”

Kumiko waved him over and he went, reluctantly. “Look at this map. Their emails don’t say specifically what road they’re taking, but Mrs. Perez was right. They’re going to Philly, and there’s a mention of a stop in Denver. That means they’ve gotta be taking I-15 up to I-70. Big interstate like that, there are going to be other cars around no matter how late at night it is.”

“We could divert them,” Brian suggested. “Signs on the road, maybe. Fake an accident?” He squinted at the map, thinking.

“I could spoof an email,” Kumiko offered.
“You can do that?”

“I basically have remote control of Isay Mozhayev’s computer, yeah. I can just log in to his email accounts and send a letter to whoever, as him.”

“Jesus.”

Kumiko shrugged. “I’m not that good a hacker, but Zoot, who wrote this program, makes their stuff user friendly.”

“So you could email the driver with instruction to take a specific route? Tell him… I don’t know, tell him there’s too many cops on the highway or something.”

“What road do you want them to take?”

Brian traced out roads on the map, trying to visualize traffic conditions, road surface quality, twists and turns. “Get them on the state highway, 167. It meets up with the interstate—it’s reasonable as an alt route. And there are better ambush points all along it so it doesn’t lock us in.”

Kumiko nodded and started typing.

“You can make it sound like Mozhayev, right?”

She shot him a sideways glare. “Of course.”

“Good. Hey, about the laundry program—are you still installing it? It’s not really related to this hijacking but I wasn’t sure… It was a lot of money, but the whole plan had been her idea in the first place. He and Rome had been looking for something new, something to get them out of Miami, but the money wasn’t really the issue. And it was only a few months of work, anyway; if Kumiko pulled out of this job, he could probably wheedle the laundry program out of her and go to work himself, somewhere else, if he had to. He and Rome could scam rich-kid newb racers in Connecticut if they had to.

“Of course it is.” Kumiko snorted. “You memorized that bank account number, right? Because I can tell you the info again if you want to check the pennies trickling in, but this is the last time. And I’m not writing it down for you.”

Brian smiled. “I remember it.” He patted her on the shoulder. “I need to get some sleep before tomorrow.”

“Goodnight,” she said absently. The three open cans of Diet Coke at her elbow told him that she wouldn’t be sleeping at all tonight.

Brian looked at his phone as he stumbled down the hall, exhausted. Six hours until the breakfast meeting, and if he was lucky he’d get to spend at least a few of those asleep and not staring at the ceiling chewing over every single step of his mistakes with Dom.

He’d really fucked up, he thought as he stripped mechanically and flopped onto his cheap foam mattress. The layers of the con had invaded his judgement to the point where he’d actually thought Dom wanted Brian to touch him. He’d just gone for it, wanting so badly to get off with Dom’s hands on him that he hadn’t thought. He’d just barged forward and taken. And after what Dom had told him…

He racked his memory for the moment when it had gone wrong, when he’d pressured Dom into going along with something he didn’t want. Dom hadn’t kissed him first, he remembered. He’d kissed Brian on the deck, in front of Daisy—to give them cover to snoop around and plant Kumiko’s program. But after that, it had been Brian pushing things. He’d literally pushed Dom into that closet, he’d basically attacked him in Isay’s office. He’d pushed him against the wall and rubbed off on him the second they weren’t being watched anymore.

What Brian had done would have been a disaster with any straight guy. But considering Dom’s history… Brian would probably never see him again after this. Never so much as shake his hand. Dom would avoid him forever, and he’d be right to.

The thought settled down on his chest like a heavy weight, compressing his lungs until he was gasping for air. Not choking—crying. Silent sobbing breaths shook him; a couple of tears leaked out of his closed eyes and trickled down the sides of his face into his ears. When he lifted his hand to squeeze his eyelids shut, trying to contain the tears, his hand was shaking.

He’d fucked up so badly. This was worse than not stopping Miller, it was worse than the worst thing he’d ever done. It was everything he’d ever wanted, smashed. And worst of all, he’d hurt Dom by it. There was no coming back from this, and right now, here, alone in this cheap rowhouse, was the only space he had to feel it. Tomorrow he’d bury it deep again, put on his game face, and do his fucking job. But right now, this burst of pain in his chest—it hurt.

It just fucking hurt.
Chapter 13

Brian’s alarm went off less than five hours later. He blinked open gritty eyes and silently cursed Daisy’s mixed drinks so he didn’t have to ask himself how much of his puffy face was due to crying like an infant—like a faggot, he thought. Fuck, he thought he’d gotten past that old self-hatred. But when you fuck up colossal some habits come back to you.

He splashed water on his face, giving himself a whole minute to wallow, and then pushed the memory of last night out of his head. It was time to focus.

He and Kumiko got to the diner ten minutes early, but Letty and Mia were already there. Brian hesitated infinitesimally in the doorway when he saw them, but took a breath and plunged forward.

“Morning.” He nodded at them. “I thought you might not be here, Letty. Isn’t this the big day?”

Letty grinned at him. “It is. I’m starting how I intend to go on.”

He laughed. “Fair enough.”

“The ceremony is at four,” Mia added. “We don’t have to really start getting ready until after noon.”

“Plenty of time for crime,” Kumiko said.

She and Letty exchanged smiles, and Brian sat down and picked up a menu. When he glanced up, Mia was staring at him. He clenched his teeth. That could mean anything, and if she hated him, Christ knew he deserved it twice over. He just didn’t want to think about it.

He was saved by the appearance of Rome, and then a few seconds later Leon and Vince. Vince pulled up a chair next to Kumiko, hopefully doggish look on his face. That disaster was headed off by the appearance of Dom, escorting Mrs. Perez. In the shuffle of moving chairs to make room, somehow Mrs. Perez ended up sitting between Kumiko and Vince. Dom sat on the far side of the table from Brian, next to Mia.

That was good, Brian thought. If Dom stayed out of arm’s reach, he wouldn’t have to think so hard to remind himself not to reach out and touch him. That was over. It was better this way; Dom was no doubt staying away on purpose.

Once everyone had ordered and Brian had his hands wrapped around a generously-sized mug of coffee, the planning began. Kumiko started it off by detailing what she’d discovered in Isay’s computer. Letty and Rome argued about how to subdue the drivers for several minutes, until Mia stepped in to mention that they had a pair of air guns and tranq darts—Brian wondered if they’d upgraded from the ones he had seen in the files on the LA truck hijackings. Leon wanted to talk ambush tactics.

“You’re on scouting duty,” Dom said finally. It was the first thing he’d said to the whole table since he arrived. “Leon, your car is distinctive, but the Bratva haven’t seen you anywhere near any of their people. So you’re the one who gets to follow the van out of the city.”

“I have phones,” Kumiko said, opening up her purse and producing eight burners still in the packages. “This might be more paranoid than we need to be, but—” she shrugged

“Cool.” Dom took his, examined it, and put it in his pocket. Out of the corner of his eye, Brian saw the others do the same, but his attention was on Dom. There was something off about him. Brian hadn’t just fucked up his own life. He’d hurt Dom. He swallowed hard and pushed his eggs around his plate.

“Look, before we get all excited about the gadgets and everything,” Vince cut in, “I gotta say it: we can still back out of this. This is Letty’s wedding day, and we don’t have to end it by getting into a gun battle with the Russian mob.”

Mrs. Perez shifted in her seat.

Letty sucked her teeth at Vince. “If you’re scared, don’t pretend like you gotta bail for my sake, pendejo. I’m in. It’s been ages since we’ve run a good job like this. And it’s no like one van is a challenge. It’s no oil tanker.”

“Yeah, but its cargo isn’t oil either,” Vince pointed out. “I’m just saying, we should take a minute.”

“Hey, but its cargo isn’t oil either,” Vince pointed out. “I’m just saying, we should take a minute.”

“He’s not wrong,” Dom rumbled. Brian blinked at him, surprised. “I mean, it doesn’t have to be all of us in it. Me and Leon stop the van, toss out the Bratva, drive it off. Simple.”

Now Mia looked furious. “Simple until the Bratva clock your stupid face and track you down and murder you. You’re not kicking the rest of us out of this, Dom. You’re not in charge here.”

Kumiko leaned forward. “I’m not quitting now. We’ve spent months playing nice with Bratva and
now it’s time to have some fun.”

“Fun?” Mrs. Perez burst out. “Madre de Dios! These are children you’re talking about!”

Kumiko ducked her gaze. “I know they are. I do want to help them, and I will.”

“I don’t think you do know, young lady. My Elida, when she was ten, her mother got sent to McClure. They got her on intent to sell.” Mrs. Perez shook her head. “Elida came to stay with me. She failed all her classes that first semester, except PE. Told me she had to work out if she was ever going to be a backup dancer, like for Beyoncé. I asked why she didn’t want to aim higher. She could be the next Beyoncé, I said. But she just twirled around and told me she didn’t want to be famous, didn’t want to have everyone looking at her like that. She just wanted to dance all day every day and be happy.

“I think, okay, this is a good dream. She could really do that, if she tries hard.

“So she goes out to the club, she goes dancing. And some man finds her there and tells her I don’t know what. Maybe he tells her she’s gonna be a dancer. And for that dream she’s going to be hurt? She’s going to be hurt.” Her voice broke.

Dom leaned across the table toward her and murmured quietly. Brian looked away.

“Look, ma’am.” Vince sounded like he definitely regretted saying anything. “I didn’t mean—we’re doing this, definitely.”

“No doubt,” Rome echoed.

Dom straightened up. According to Mia he wasn’t in charge, but everyone still looked to him anyway. “So, we all know what we’re doing, yeah? Any questions?”

“We got the ambush spot all picked out, right?” Leon wanted to know. “Is it set up already?”

“Rome and I are doing that today,” Brian said. He couldn’t help but flick his eyes over at Dom, who was watching him. After an awkward half a beat, he added, “While you’re all at the wedding.”

“Sounds good.” Letty grinned.

“Have you told Jacinto yet that you’re going to be skipping out on your own reception?” Mia asked dryly.

“Jacinto isn’t the one to worry about,” Letty laughed. “He’s with us, even with the wedding being today. His mother is the one who’s going to skin me alive when she finds out the timing of this.”

“Does she know what we’re doing?” Rome sounded horrified.

“I haven’t told her the details,” Letty drawled. “But she wouldn’t get all judgy about the hijacking part. Jacinto and his brothers have gotten into enough shady shit that she’s immune.”

It was impossible to keep from looking at Dom. He looked good, of course; even in a basic white t-shirt and jeans he looked like a fucking model. Once or twice Brian glanced over and caught Dom looking back, a serious expression on his face. Serious looked good on him. Brian always made himself look away, but he could feel Dom’s eyes on him. It was a relief when the breakfast broke up and he could drive away with Rome.

“Aight, cuz, what happened?” Rome asked as soon as they pulled out of the parking lot.

Brian looked over from the driver’s seat of the Miata. The tiny car meant there was very little distance between them; he could see a tiny furrow in Rome’s brow. “What do you mean?”

“The fuck you think I mean? You’re walkin around like somebody ran over your dog, man. You obviously fucked something up.”

Brian shrugged.

“Nah, nah. Don’t give me that. Let me guess: you fuckin crashed and burned just like I fuckin told you you were gonna. And now I gotta pick up your sad little white boy ass and pour alcohol into you until you recover.”

Brian squinted at the road. He knew not answering was as good as confirming it, but he really wasn’t up to re-hashing all his mistakes at the moment.

Rome sat, waiting out his silence for a few seconds, then gave up in impatience. “Fine, whatever. After we finish this job, I’mma take you to a dive in Buenos Aires and get you wasted, and then you gon’ tell me all your sins.”

“Buenos Aires?”

“Or wherever.”

“No, really,” Brian said, glad to change the subject. “Where do you think you want to go after this?”
“Mmm. Anywhere with straight roads and few cops. Or people who know which cops to pay off.”

“Yeah.”

After a minute, Rome said, “Suki said somethin about her and Tej going to Japan for a while. She’s been running, you know. Not for a cartel,” he said hastily when Brian looked over. “For a friend. But last I heard it was gettin a little hot down south, and she’s got cousins.”

“Suki doesn’t speak a goddamn word of Japanese,” Brian said.

Rome laughed. “Yeah, I know, man. Neither does Tej. But like I said, cousins. And Kumiko’s going back, her boy is gettin out soonish.”

“Couple months.”

“Yeah, so, they can settle in.”

“It would be nice to have connections.”

Brian could feel Rome looking at him sharply. “You thinking of heading over to Japan, white boy? You don’t speak any fucking Japanese either.”

Brian smirked. “You could come with me and we’d both stick out like sore thumbs.”

“Ha. That’s true.”

Brian pulled onto the highway before Rome spoke again.

“I know you ain’t stupid, cuz, so I know I don’t gotta say it, but just in case: you and I are going to the same place after this. Japan or Argentina or where-the-fuck-ever. Suki’s got the right idea with her cousins, man. And you’re the only fuckin family I got left.”

“Yeah,” Brian said. His heart hurt a little bit, in a good way. He and Rome were more likely to punch each other than use words to express affection, but apparently this was one of those rare occasions. “Me too.”

The strength of the sun had practically doubled in the less than half an hour they’d been driving out to the Otero’s garage, and when Brian got out of the Miata the heat just about knocked him dizzy. Papa Otero wasn’t anywhere in sight when they pulled up, but the key was in the front wheel well of the hulking black Escalade Brian had left parked behind the building.

“Are you sure Otero got this fucking thing bulletproofed?” Rome asked. “That glass looks factory standard.”

“He said his dude was gonna.” Brian open the driver’s side door and tried to roll down the window. It sank about three inches and stopped. “Yeah, this is new glass. It’s inch-and-a-half, that’ll stop just about anything short of a 30-cal.”

Rome’s eyebrows went up. “Sweet.”

Brian held up the key. “You sure you want to be the one to drive this? Your Camaro is faster for sure.”

Rome snatched the key away. “Fuck yes I’m sure. My baby isn’t getting bullet holes in her, not when I can drive this beast.”

“Beast? More like a whale.”

“Nah, man. Whales get harpooned. This thing is like one of those prehistoric sharks.” Rome patted the side of the Escalade. “Eats whales like Cheetos.”

Brian laughed. “If you say so. Meet you at the site.”

The ambush site was about fifty minutes out of the city, on a stretch of two-lane highway through a monochromatic landscape of rocks and sagebrush. Above them, the sky shone brilliant blue, the only cheerful thing in the whole desert, Brian thought. The only sign of human presence, other than the road, was a concrete-block chem toilet and a small brown sign proclaiming the beginning of a hiking trail.

For a few minutes after he parked, his Miata was the only car in sight on the road or off it. Then the SUV lumbered up and Rome climbed out.

“I can see why you want that thing in position out here instead of tryina chase the van all the way out.” Rome rolled his shoulders. “It’s heavy as sh*t.”

“Come on, lock it up and we’ll be back in civilization in time for lunch.”

“Hold up. Aren’t you worried the cops’ll scope it? Not very stealth, just leaving it.”
Brian nodded at the sign. “It’s a trailhead. People leave their cars here all day sometimes.”

Rome shook his head. “People come hiking out here? Fucking white people, man. Don’t know hell when they sweatin’ they balls off right smack in the middle of it.”

“You’re telling me.”

“Whatever. You white as hell, too, cuz, don’t pretend you ain’t.”

“I have nevah been hiking,” Brian said in his best southern matron voice. He’d picked up the routine from Rob, his very first boyfriend, who had been a skinny light-skinned black man who’d escaped a childhood in a rural town in south Georgia. It was the campiest he got; he minced a couple of steps and then cracked up when Rome rolled his eyes.

“You know I hate it when you pull that southern belle bullshit.”

“That’s why I do it.” Brian let his wrist flounce delicately as he got up in Rome’s space. “I’m not annoying you, am I?”

“Fuck off.”

Brian cackled. Rome was humoring him; he was only acting manic because he was covering for how fucked up he was, and he knew Rome knew that. But that’s why they were friends, after all.

“Come on, dahling,” Brian said. “I need a gin fizz.”

“You know I hate it when you pull that southern belle bullshit.”

“Fuck if I know. I noticed it just now—it almost ran a red to keep up with us.”

“Shit.”

The light turned green and Brian’s eyes darted around them, checking for an opening. Without putting on his blinker, he changed lanes in the intersection, darting in front of a Ford F-150, then immediately turned left into the lot of the strip mall that bordered the road, nearly scraping paint against oncoming traffic. He swerved through the lot, leaving a sedan honking in his wake, and spun onto a side street. Total time in the parking lot was maybe ten seconds. He checked his mirrors. The Peugeot was nowhere in sight. He took the next left, driving at random through neighborhoods he’d never been in before.

“You know what I like about hanging with you? The high speed chases,” Rome said, dry. They were going thirty miles an hour, a little fast for the residential side street they were on, but not conspicuous. Brian took a right. His heart was starting to pound, catching up with the danger they were in.

“Did we lose them?”

“I think so.”

“Who the fuck are those guys?” Brian tapped his thumbs on the steering wheel, annoyed. “Drug runners.” Rome shrugged. “Old school mafia?”

“I don’t like that they keep turning up.”

“We already decided that it’s an opportunity, man. Why you freaking out now?” Rome squinted at him. “You want to talk about your feelings?” By his tone of voice, that was the last thing he wanted to do.

“No.” Brian turned abruptly down an alley, bumped along beside the garbage cans and old cars that populated the backs of the houses, and pulled out onto a different street.
“I think you lost them, cuz.”

Brian smothered his frustration, stilled his hands on the wheel, and took a breath. “Yeah. Alright.”

##

The church for Letty’s wedding didn’t look like much on the outside, Dom thought, just yet another nineties-era clapboard building exactly like the shops and businesses on the same block. But inside, the stained glass of the windows filled the whole building with colored light, turning the red and purple flower arrangements on the end of every pew an innumerable variety of rosy colors. Dom stood by the door for a moment, just breathing. Then he walked down the aisle, checking to make sure that everything was in place before the ceremony started.

His suit jacket pulled at his shoulders, but in a way it was comforting. It felt like the jacket was holding him together, without it he might turn to smoke and blow away. Since his conversation with Mia last night, he’d felt strange. Like he was crumbling into fragments, or like he was empty of everything—including fear. What that said about him, he didn’t know. Maybe fear had been the only thing keeping him together, the past few years. Maybe he’d been afraid his whole life. Now he felt scooped out, hollow. Walking under the stained glass made him think… he didn’t know what he might find in the world to fill him up again.

Mia would laugh at him if he ever said any of that out loud.

Dom pushed the central flower arrangement on the altar two inches to the right. Letty was probably freaking out right now. Jacinto, too. Luckily he didn’t have to deal with either of them: Mia, Cara and Letty were still at the hotel, and Jacinto and his brothers were on their way. Everyone else, the guests and family, would be arriving soon. But all Dom had to worry about was making sure the church was set up and the priest was ready.

He met up with the priest back in the foyer just in time for Jacinto’s sister to arrive with yet more flowers. Letty hadn’t put her foot down about a lot, but she had demanded flowers: orange and red and purple, spilling over the edges of vases, everywhere. Dom unloaded more vases, heavy with water, and placed them around the chapel as everyone else started to arrive.

There weren’t that many people attending. Letty’s parents were dead, she was an only child, and most of her extended family was in Mexico. Cara and her parents had come up to represent that side of the family. Letty had some cousins in New York, he knew, but they weren’t close. Really, the team was her closest kin. Mia was the one paying for all these flowers, and the food at the party afterward, with Dom’s money. Letty had her own money, of course, but that’s how family did, and they only had each other.

Jacinto’s family was much bigger. Most of the guests on his side were his brothers and sisters, with their husbands and wives and kids. The Barquín family was noisy and huge and Dom knew exactly what Letty saw in them: a place to be, a place to belong. She had that with the crew, of course. But he felt like none of them ever got quite as much family as they wanted, no matter how they tried.

Mrs. Barquín arrived before the ceremony was scheduled to start, the least Cuban thing Dom had ever seen her do, leading a parade of her daughters and their children. Dom took her arm, trying not to hulk too much next to her short but stout frame, and escorted her to the front pew. By the time he got her and her grandchildren settled, the rest of the church was slowly filling up. Leon and Vince sat together, and behind them the combined families of Jacinto’s two brothers settled like a flock of birds. The church was small—a chapel than church, really. Twenty, maybe twenty-five people in the pews nearly filled it up.

Dom went and sat by Vince as Jacinto filed in with his brothers and joined the priest at the front of the church, waiting. It was strange to think that once upon a time he’d thought that might be him someday. It felt very far away, but there was still a twinge in his heart at the thought. Letty and him had been good together, once.

“He looks like he’s going to puke,” Vince whispered.

Dom snorted quietly. “Letty would shoot him.”

Music began to play from hidden speakers and everyone turned to see Letty at the entrance of the church, radiant in her red dress. Mia and Cara processed down the aisle in front of her and then it was her turn. She’s gorgeous, Dom thought. He should feel jealous, but he didn’t. She looked more beautiful now than she ever had when she’d been together with him. It was the joy on her face that transformed her, and he was happy for her. She deserved someone who was as completely in her thrall as Jacinto was, someone who would do anything to make her happy, to keep her safe.

Someone who’d blow up his world for her, he thought, involuntary. He didn’t want to think about Brian right now. But he couldn’t help it, a review of every sacrifice Brian had made for him running behind his eyes: his income, his career, his physical safety. He’d almost lost his freedom. Brian had burned his life down for Dom and Dom had just—taken off. Walked away.

He swallowed hard. He’d never entirely wanted to be that person for Letty. He’d wanted to want to. But he hadn’t. With Brian… he’d been worrying about what people would think of him if they knew he was with a man—fucking a man, getting fucked by a man. He forced himself to think it without flinching. People who didn’t know him would treat him differently, he was certain. Even Vince would. He glanced over. Vince watched the ceremony quietly, his scruff tamed and his
tattoos hidden by long sleeves. If he went for it with Brian, Vince was not about to accept that the way he was accepting Jacinto into their family for Letty’s sake.

He wasn’t sure he could handle that, the way people would look at him. He could barely admit it out loud to himself.

And even if Dom did say something, did ask for what he wanted, that was no guarantee that Brian would be into it. He’d been thinking about those minutes in the spare fucking room at Daisy’s house over and over. All night it felt like, and not in the good way. He could interpret Brian’s behavior as encouraging, if he wanted to. But Brian was good at acting, good at remixing reality into a convenient narrative, and he knew—he knew for a goddamn fact that Brian had been acting. On Dom’s end, the kissing, the hooking up had all felt real, but that didn’t mean it was. And Brian knew now about how low Dom had gotten; he had to know that he deserved better than what Dom could give him. Dom could destroy everything left in his life that was good, and for what?

But he couldn’t escape that feeling. Brian had destroyed everything, for him. Just to get him across the border.

“We are here today to bring together two families,” the priest said, “and join them into something entirely new. A new creation, the ground in which will grow years—decades—of love and struggle. That’s what a family is: love, and struggle. Sometimes it feels like we’re struggling against each other. In the best of times, we face the world and struggle together. And together, we can achieve so much more. By supporting each other, husband and wife, both can reach higher, run farther, lift more than either could by themselves. And when we fail, we are not alone. We comfort each other in hardship and celebrate together in times of joy.”

Dom swallowed hard, watching the priest take a red ribbon that matched Letty’s dress and wind it around Letty and Jacinto’s joined hands. He wanted that. He did. Even if it was a struggle. His family was growing and changing: Jacinto, Mia’s pregnancy that he couldn’t help but hope resulted in a baby, as difficult as that might be. And for him? It felt like it was time to take a risk of his own. Like Mia had said, Brian belonged in the family.

And shit, if he fucked it all up, at least he could be pretty sure Brian wouldn’t tell anyone else about it. If Brian didn’t want him, he was never admitting shit to Vince and them. And if Brian did… he’d deal with that when it happened.
Dom’s phone vibrated. Across the reception hall, Vince and Mia both reached for their phones at the same time.

*Loading up the van right now,* Leon’s text popped on his screen, readable before he even unlocked his phone. It was immediately replaced by, *eight teenagers. 2 guards l driver.*

Dom caught Vince’s eye. It was time to go. On the dancefloor, Letty danced a salsa with one of Jacinto’s brothers, the string of dollar bills Mrs. Barquin had draped around her neck flying out from her shoulders, her dress swirling around her calves as she moved. Jacinto’s mother had thrown a fit and a half about that dress—Dom had heard Letty shouting through the phone about it for weeks. And then Mia had actually called him up and complained about the drama for half an hour.

He’d put the phone on speaker and gotten on with the tune-up he’d been doing for the mother of one the guys who raced with him. Personally he didn’t see what the big deal was: the dress was fine. It wasn’t very wedding-y, what with the way it was red, or orange in the right light, and barely came past Letty’s knees, but it was hot, and also classy. Mrs. Barquín had envisioned something white and ruffled and tiered that dragged along the floor, he guessed. It was convenient now, though. He couldn’t imagine Letty driving in a dress that made her look like a cake.

Mia slid out onto the dance floor and grabbed Letty’s arm, whispering in her ear. Letty smiled apologetically at Jacinto’s brother, and then the two of them were weaving through the dancers toward Dom, snagging Jacinto out of his own dance on the way.

“Ready?” he asked.

Letty nodded, pulling Jacinto against her side. “Yeah, Jacinto’s mother is taking over with the guests, pretending Jacinto and I are taking off early on our honeymoon. She’s going to hate me forever, but fuck it.”

Jacinto laughed. “She won’t hate you! She’s used to this kind of thing from me.” He kissed Letty’s cheek. “Meet you at the rendezvous, querida.”

Dom shook his head. Letty was braver than he was, but it was her mother-in-law.

“Come on,” Mia said, and they slipped out of the reception hall and into the neon glow of Vegas at night.

#

“They just turned onto East Lake Mead Boulevard.” Kumiko’s voice came through the burner phone clearly, if a little tinny. Dom glanced over at the phone; Vince had popped up the can holder and wedged the phone into it so they could both speak into the group call they were using to communicate. They’d experimented with better ways to communicate than the walkie-talkies they used to use, but this was Dom’s preferred method. This way everyone’s hands were free and the bandana around his face wasn’t getting fucked up by a Bluetooth headset.

He and Vince had bickered over who got to drive and who got the guns, but in the end it was pretty obvious that Dom’s Civic was better equipped for this job than the ’68 Firebird Vince was driving at the moment. He’d picked it up two weeks before the trip to Vegas, and while he had big plans, the thing was still entirely factory-standard. Besides, Dom had pointed out, Vince was still the best with the grappling hook, bum arm and all.

“They haven’t seen you, right?” Mia’s voice was harder to hear, like she was farther away from her phone.

“Nope.” Kumiko sounded cheerful. “There’s a bit of traffic still, and Leon here is actually a decent driver.”

Mia laughed.

“Everyone’s on the call?” Kumiko asked. “Speak up so I can make sure I can hear you.”

“I’m surprised that you think Leon is a good driver,” Mia teased. “But Letty and I can hear you just fine.”

“Same here,” Vince said. “Dom and I are getting you loud and clear.”

“You know I got you, baby,” Pearce said. His voice crackled slightly, but was plenty understandable.

“We’re almost at go,” Brian said. “How far out are you?”

There was something about his voice, some hint of a southern accent that Dom wasn’t used to hearing. He clenched his teeth, chewing on the feeling it called up. He wanted to get closer, wanted to take Brian apart, figure him out. And pin him, put his mouth on him, bite him right on the top of his pec hard enough to draw blood. Would Brian let him? he wondered. Would he hold Dom’s eyes with that fearlessness that lit up his face? Would he bite back?
Fuck, he wanted this job to be over, not just so he could get away from the fucking cruelty of the Bratva and their willingness to enslave children, but so he could corner Brian and figure out whatever this was. There was something between them, he knew it, something more than lies and a job. Now that he’d decided to do something about it, he felt less shame than he’d expected. They were on the chase, his blood was up—that probably had something to do with it.

He punched the gas, darted around a slow minivan, and took the exit toward Lake Mead Boulevard. He and Vince were a bit behind the Bratva van, but he had forty minutes to catch up, and once they did, each car would take a turn following, then falling back, so no single car spent the whole drive in the van’s rearview. He and Letty and Leon were used to it; they could set up the framework for a hijacking in their sleep by now.

The Bratva van was a big, chunky Ford Super Club Wagon XLT, almost a bus, which made it easy to follow through the light traffic. Even from a distance and in the dark, the XLT towered over other cars on the road, and it wasn’t nimble. Whoever was driving it had had practice with the lumbering vehicle and took turns slow and wide. The hardest part of trailing it was staying slow enough not to pass it; Dom and Leon and Letty took turns, over the course of half an hour, slowly overtaking the van and then turning and circling back once they were out of sight, so they could come up behind it again. Only one of them was in sight of the van at any point.

It might have been unnecessary caution; the van showed no sign of realizing they were being followed. But it made Dom feel better, especially once they pulled away from the city. The state highway didn’t have many lights, which meant the part of the plan where they convinced the Bratva that the hijacking had been carried out by the dudes in the big scary black SUVs, not some scrappy little nothing team of people who didn’t even have any stake in Las Vegas, might actually work.

It would work if they were careful, anyway. The matte black sky and the glare of headlights made every car on the road more anonymous, but there were barely any cars around and that meant the Bratva had more chances to notice his crew. He didn’t like it, and he kept carefully back, until the van was only a small pair of brake lights ahead of him.

At least the empty highway meant there was no one to call the cops on them.

“Seventeen,” Kumiko said over the phone. “Eighteen. That’s milepost eighteen, Brian you ready?”

“I’m pulling out now.”

“Roman?”

“I’m on the road, heading north. Not a soul in sight.”

“We’re just passing mile seventeen.” Vince said into the phone beside him. Dom glanced over. His face was in shadow, lit only by the dim lights on the dash, but Vince’s eyes glittered eagerly. It was good to be hunting again.

“We’re three miles ahead of you and eyes out for the van.” Brian’s voice was steady, but there was a minor-key note in it. For a second, Dom was distracted. But then Pearce started talking again.

“I’ve got headlights in the rearview, headlights in the rearview.”

“We’re pulling up,” Letty said. She’d been furthest behind the van, but now Dom could see her in his rearview mirror. It was comforting to know she was there with him, in this. A hijacking was always dangerous, especially at night, with people who hadn’t worked together before. They could wreck, get shot—any of them could die tonight. But he had his crew there with him. The car under his hands, his crew’s voices in his ears: he was bigger than himself, and he could feel it.

He pulled his bandana up over his mouth and nose, catching Vince doing the same out of the corner of his eye. “Don’t forget to cover your faces,” Vince said, his voice slightly muffled.

“Leon and I are on your six, Letty,” Kumiko said.

“Alright alright,” Pearce said, his voice a staccato burst. “Here we go.”

Dom couldn’t see that far ahead, but he could picture it: Brian sliding over beside Roman so they took up both lanes of the two-lane highway, hitting the brakes, blocking in the Bratva’s van. As he imagined it, he could see the flash of red ahead of him, brake lights in front of the van. Then the van hit the brakes too.

In those first couple of seconds, the Bratva driver would just be annoyed. But now they slowed further. Dom could see his own speedometer sinking, even while he gained on the van: 65 – 60 – 55. Now they’d be starting to get alarmed.

“Letty, you ready?”

“You’re the slow one.” To his left, Letty’s car surged forward and then they were in action. He took the right flank, Letty on the left and Leon behind, his Nissan the only one with bulletproofing in the windshield making him the best choice to face the van head-on.

The XLT had tinted windows, the better to transport human trafficking victims without getting caught, so it was impossible to tell how they were reacting as Dom’s crew boxed them in. They
slowed—they didn’t have a choice, it was that or run right into the back bumper of the big Escalade that Roman was driving, and Dom figured the Bratva driver would make the same calculation there that he would: the XLT was too top-heavy, and the Escalade would win that collision.

So the van slowed, swerving side to side slightly, and then the front passenger side window cracked open and Dom spotted a rifle barrel.

“Gun!” Vince shouted, right in Dom’s car. He had his own pistol out, but the angle was bad. And it was impossible to know where the kids were behind that tinted glass.

The van swerved and its headlights flickered, flickered, cut out: Mia must have hit it with the electromagnetic sticky grenade Jacinto had picked up for them on short notice. Engine dead, the van slowed even more, and started to slew off to the right side of the road, into Dom’s car. Grimacing, he let the van scrape up against his Civic, grinding against the paint. The Civic rattled with the contact but while those kids were probably terrified, it wasn’t anywhere close to a wreck.

The van slowed, slowed—Dom held the wheel steady, keeping it on the road.

Shots rang out—one of them hit the top right corner of his windshield, letting in air and noise. Dom clenched his jaw. “Anyone hurt?”

A chorus of, “We’re good,” “Fine,” came in from every car.

“We need to break one of their windows,” Dom said. “Leon?”

“Gotcha.” Leon veered left slightly, just enough to give Kumiko a vantage out her window to take a shot at the back of the van.

Dom didn’t know if Kumiko had shot a beanbag round before, or even handled a shotgun, but they were so close it probably wouldn’t matter. He heard three dull thuds, one after another, and then a gaping hole the size of a human head appeared in the rear van window. He had a moment to hope none of the passengers were sprayed by the glass, then heard another dull ‘thwood.’

White clouds of gas billowed out the hole in the back windshield, and the van juddered and slowed even further—someone pulled the emergency brake, Dom figured. The van shuddered to a stop half in the right lane and half on the shoulder, still neatly boxed in. He was proud of his crew, and even Roman, who was handling the front side of the box with ease. Brian had pulled forward, keeping out of sight of Bratva thugs who might be familiar with the bright red Miata; they wouldn’t be fooled by the bandana across his face, not if they got a good look at the car. Even that was something to be proud of, that Brian would step out of the limelight because he trusted the rest of the crew to do things right. As soon as the van stopped, there was a flash of headlights ahead of them, Brian pulling a U turn and coming back toward them, then past them to keep watch on the city side of the hijacking, just in case.

Dom didn’t have time to examine the heat in his belly at the sight of Brian whipping past: the Bratva guards stumbled out of the van, choking, eyes streaming from the CS gas. All three of them were armed with what looked in the stark headlights like automatic pistols, old school machineguns. They couldn’t see but they could easily start spraying bullets—“Get those tranqs up,” Dom barked.

Vince popped open his own door and used it as cover, raising his tranq gun.

Pop, pop pop. Tranq gunfire from the other side of the car.

Brap brap. Answering automatic fire twisted his stomach up, but then more tranq shots went off. Vince fired, fired again, and the guard he was aiming for stumbled. The muzzle of his gun drooped, he took two steps forward and collapsed in a heap.

“Letty? Pearce?”

“All good on this side, boss.” Letty’s drawl made him feel like he could breathe again.

“Looks like all three Bratva are asleep and dreamin’,” Pearce said. “Those poor kids are probably ready to get away from that gas though.”

A door slammed and Kumiko darted forward into the light from Dom’s headlights. Was she going for the kids? It wasn’t supposed to be her job, but she wasn’t part of their crew, either. “Kumiko, stay back,” Dom barked into the phone. “They might still be kicking.”

She ignored him; she wasn’t carrying her phone, he realized.

“Fuck.” Dom stepped out of his car, leaving the keys in the ignition, and followed her. He wasn’t armed; he was supposed to be a driver. But he could secure the footsoldiers while she got weepy over the children or whatever.

Kumiko didn’t go straight for the van, though. Leon and Letty were prying the doors open on the other side, ducking away from the CS gas that poured out and reaching for the teenagers inside. Kumiko stopped next to the Bratva driver who lay unconscious on the pavement beside the van.

She crouched by him, half rolling him over so she could see his face. Cursing, she kicked him in the ribs and darted around to the guard laying in the gravel on the other side.
Teenagers spilled out of the van, along with the remnants of the gas blowing away on the wind. They were all choking, tears streaming from their eyes—they wouldn’t look back at this experience fondly, but it wouldn’t hurt them in the long term, and it had been the safest way to make sure none of them got shot. One of the girls, tall and dark-skinned, was screaming piercingly at Letty and waving her arms.

Dom finished patting down the Bratva driver, removing his pistol and a knife he found in his pocket, and followed Kumiko. He wasn’t sure what she was doing—he caught sight of her again in time to see her stepping away from the second Bratva and over to the third, again checking his face.

“Fuck!” She spun around, hands flying in the air in an explosion of rage as she cursed up a storm in Japanese. Her white bandana sagged down her face and she ripped it off, balling it up in her fist.

Dom clenched his jaw. He didn’t know what was going on with her, and he didn’t like surprises on his jobs. Still, so far everything was going fine. Vince approached the unconscious Bratva guards, too, with zip ties. Kumiko kicked the third guard sharply in the ribs and Dom finally caught up with her. He pulled her away by the arm.

“Spill.” He glared at her. “Now.”

Unintimidated, Kumiko shook her head: frustration, not refusal. “He’s not here.”

“Who?”

“Alexei.”

“Who?” he repeated, shaking her arm a little.

“Alexei Polzin. The vor’s son.”

Before he could shake her harder, hard enough to get an explanation out of her, the phone in his pocket came to life, the open call still broadcasting on speaker.

“Uh, guys?”

“Brian?” Dom didn’t like the note of worry in Brian’s voice.

“We’ve got incoming. A van, and a couple of big trucks or SUVs behind it. I can see their lights on the curve on the road from here, they’ll be at our location in less than a minute.”

“That’s him,” Kumiko burst out, and wrenched her arm away, re-tying her bandana over her face, pulling it viciously tight.

“Dom? We have a problem,” Mia’s voice came through. “Elida Perez is not in this group of kids.”

“Yeah,” Leon chimed in. “This kid here is saying there’s another van.”

Dom could hear them shouting through the phones and also around the corner of the van. He didn’t have time to think about it. “Get the kids away,” he barked, already moving. “If these are Bratva reinforcements, we need to be in the cars and driving before they get here.” Kumiko was halfway back to Leon’s car—he lunged after her but then changed his mind, almost slipping on loose gravel as he pivoted toward the front of the scene. Pearce had left the Escalade’s driver’s-side door open, keys in the ignition—it didn’t surprise him that Brian worked with professionals—and Dom slammed the door behind himself, revving the engine and popping out onto the road.

Kumiko had closed herself up in Leon’s SX and was pulling out onto the road like she was going to hijack a second van all by herself.

He was listening with half an ear to Brian’s play-by-play of the oncoming vehicles: the second van, and whoever was trailing it, were coming at speed. Kumiko hesitated on the road; she was the weakest driver of all of them. She had to know she couldn’t stop multiple vehicles by herself, and she wasn’t working with the team, not anymore. If she ever had been.

“What the fuck, Kumiko.” He was pretty sure she could hear him; Leon had had a phone open in his car. “What are you doing?”

“Alexei’s got to be in one of those cars.”

“Who the fuck is Alexei?” He was in too much hurry to be furious, but goddamn he was going to be later.

“He shot my best friend.”

That sounded…familiar. But they didn’t have time for explanations.

“Dom, Rome, they’re almost on us.” Brian’s voice over the phone wasn’t loud. “You guys ready?”

Dom looked around. Someone had taken his Civic and all the kids off on a path into the hard, flat desert, lights off. He could barely see their dust leading away from the Bratva van, still listing beside the road with its doors open. A shadow in the ditch was, he was pretty sure, Vince with a rifle. Not an ideal setup.
“Kumiko, with me.” He tried to make himself sound reassuring. There would be time for cursing her out and refusing to work with her ever again if they all made it through the night alive, but she was Brian’s. He wasn’t going to let her try to blockade the road by herself. “You saw how Rome and Brian blockaded the first van? Let’s do it.”
That was not what Brian had meant Dom to do. If it had been a single extra van, the same setup—it would still be dangerous to improvise from a standing start, but he had confidence that Dom’s crew could handle it. But an extra van, plus three SUVs trailing it, plus a G Class trailing those three and occasionally trading gunfire? Dom and his crew should be away with the kids, not gearing up to dive into the middle of that.

“Yo, cuz.” Rome’s voice came through the phone. “These kids are saying there was another van’s worth of kids, and one of those Bratva SUVs has kids in it too.” He turned away and spoke rapid Spanish away from the phone. Then he picked up again, “Only two or three, but one of them is Elida Perez. Saying the Vor’s son likes her.”

“Alexei is here?” Kumiko asked. Brian revved his engine, waiting for the right second to try to… he didn’t even know. Slow down that fucking running firefight. Jesus, he was gonna die.

“Si, yeah.” Rome was talking too quickly to switch cleanly from Spanish to English.

“How the fuck am I supposed to know, cuz? Kids think all black SUVs look alike.”

Kumiko swore sharply in Japanese, her voice fading out like she’d tossed the phone onto the seat beside her while she drove.

Brian glanced into his rearview. He could see a couple of pairs of headlights coming up behind him. It was dark, and the headlights were bright enough that it was hard to tell the make of the cars, not seeing them straight on. One pair was low enough to the ground that it had to be Leon’s car—was that what Kumiko was driving?

“Dom, is that you with Kumiko?” Brian asked, but didn’t wait for an answer before starting to move. He was barely rolling back in the direction of Las Vegas, but the Bratva were driving straight at him and he was out of time.

He accelerated. The highway was only two lanes wide here, and he bridged them both, taking up the entire road. Or as much as he could in a fucking Miata, anyway. The lead vehicle rushing toward him—this close he could tell it was a Dodge Durango—started flickering its lights wildly. A Miata sucked for trying to survive a head on collision, but when it came to tight maneuvering it was lightyears ahead of a Durango. Brian waited until the very last second, the voices in the coms and the noise of the road fading into the background, his hands loose on the wheel like he was driving one of Tej’s race courses, one he’d run a thousand times.

Ten meters before he hit the Durango head on, he saw the very beginning twitch of a swerve to the left from the Durango’s driver, and he turned the wheel hard right, sailing past almost close enough to scrape paint.

He heard the sound of its brakes screeching as it spun out, but he couldn’t take the time for a glance back. The van just behind the Durango was swerving in the same direction the Durango had gone, but he was already past it, heart pounding in his ears so loudly he couldn’t hear the road noise.

Behind the van, two more SUVs trailed behind, staggered: another Dodge Durango in the left lane and, a car-length back, an older model Toyota 4Runner in the right. They were braking too, unevenly. Bratva footsoldiers hung out the window of each, and for a split second Brian thought: oh fuck. But they weren’t shooting at him, they were aiming back in the other direction, at the last car in the group, a big black Mercedes Benz G Class with a matte paint job that looked familiar.

Brian wove between the SUVs, gas pedal punched to the floor. Not thinking about the bullets flying through the same space in between. He was too fast to hit, he lied to himself—but he didn’t need to push back against the fear for very long. Their momentum plus his acceleration meant that their relative speed must’ve been over a hundred miles an hour. It took less than a breath before he was past them all and rocketing back toward the glow of Las Vegas almost as fast as their bullets.

##

The Escalade Dom was driving didn’t have anywhere near the acceleration of Leon’s SX. Dom was a better driver than Kumiko, of course, but there was only so much he could do with the thing—it weighed a million pounds. He felt like he was driving through mud, watching Kumiko get further ahead of him.

Fortunately, he didn’t have far to go. Kumiko skidded to a stop, almost smoking the tires and swinging the back end of the car across all of the southwest-bound lane, then tumbled out, leaving the driver’s side door wide open. From the way she was standing, Dom could tell she had a pistol in her hand. A shot rang out: she ducked back behind the car door, like that would save her. That car was stripped down so much bullets would punch through that door like they were hitting aluminum foil.

Dom drove up and past her, finally getting a clear view of the scene in the SX’s headlights. A
black 2005 Dodge Durango had spun out, blowing a tire and coming to a rest half off the roadway. A second van, an XLT like the first one, had pulled to a stop behind it. The sliding side door was cracked open, and Dom was sure it was full of kids even though he could only see shadows moving behind the tinted windows.

Shots impacted against the side of the Escalade, and Kumiko cried out loudly, screaming in anger maybe, saying something. Dom couldn’t understand her.

He pulled up the lumbering Escalade between Kumiko and the Bratva to give her some cover, grabbed the tranq gun from behind the seat, and scrambled over to open the door on the passenger side so he could see out on the same side where Kumiko was crouched.

She was bleeding, he saw immediately, down her side and soaking into her jeans, but she was alert and had her pistol trained on the Durango.

Her pistol was neon pink. He filed that fact away to shake his head over another time. Crazy bitch was going to get some combination of him, the Bratva, these kids, and herself killed, and Brian was going to be pissed.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he hissed.

“Killing Alexei Polzin.” She had blood on her teeth, too. Must’ve smacked her mouth on something; her breathing was okay.

“Mother of God.” He ducked back into the Escalade to look over. Three bullets had impacted on the windshield, spiderwebbing the glass but not breaking it. The Bratva van’s door was cracked open now, a rifle barrel sticking out. “Okay, get in the fucking car.”

Kumiko glared at him, but she must have heard the new vehicle coming up on them, or seen its lights. Christ, there were so many Bratva. Four per vehicle? He wasn’t sure. Another spray of rifle fire hit the side of the Escalade as Kumiko jumped in; bullets splintered across the pavement and into the brush behind him. Leon’s poor SX was getting shot to pieces.

Dom hit reverse just in time to swerve out of the way of a second SUV, this one a black Toyota 4Runner, that came barreling up on them, nearly sideswiping the front of the Escalade. Fuck. This fucking whale could take a hit, probably, but it was so fucking slow.

“Dom! What the fuck is happening?” Leon’s voice cracked out of the phone.

Kumiko picked up the phone Dom had stuffed into the cup holder and started narrating in little bursts. “We’re headed back in your direction—there’s one of these Bratva—” she broke off gasping as Dom swerved hard to try to run the 4Runner beside them off the road, throwing her sharply against the car door. “There’s a Bratva car stuck right to us.”

The trouble with doing everything in cars like this—Dom loved cars but he wasn’t stupid—is that when you were going sixty miles an hour, you ate up the road pretty goddamn fast. They were already up on the spot where they’d stopped that first van, whipping on past it, and the second van had pulled back onto the road and was pulling up behind them, abandoning the Bratva that’d been sidelined with the tire blown-out. Plus the 4Runner dogging them: Dom had to keep a light touch on the wheel, relaxed, so that as the 4Runner clanked against the side of the Escalade again and again he could keep control.

“Oh-ho!” Kumiko crowed into the phone. “Yesss!”

Dom glanced in the rearview. The van that had been accelerating up on his ass was listing off to one side of the road, headlights off. Electronics fried?

“Van’s stopped.” Letty was still laconic, cool as ice. She’d scream at him when this was all over, no doubt. This was a shitshow.

“Mia fried it?” Dom didn’t know whether to hope his sister was the one with the electromagnet or not. He’d rather she was hustling the kids out into the scrub.

“Leon did. Mia’s with me,” Letty said.

The 4Runner beside him bumped over the rough pavement and took advantage of the momentum, clocking him hard on the front corner of the Escalade. He braked, hard enough that they didn’t get a solid hit. This thing took a million to stop, too. But the 4Runner was going fast enough that they pulled ahead. Dom wasn’t even sure what their goal was—would they really just race off and leave their team straggling? They were acting like there was a fire on their ass but as far as Dom could see, the only fire was him and he wasn’t putting out that much threat.

“Get on the other side.” Kumiko spoke quickly, her accent coming out more strongly than Dom had heard before.

“What?”

“The other side, get on the other side of that car,” she said.

He glanced over; she was practically vibrating in her seat. No time to ask her what she was thinking, so he just pressed the gas. The Escalade protested, but inch by inch they caught up to the 4Runner. A white flash in his rearview mirror was Letty’s Evo, closing the distance behind them as she hit a short punch of NOS.
The Evo wasn’t bulletproofed at all. Mia was in that car. Fuck. Dom punched the gas harder, even though it was as close to the floorboards as it would go already. The 4Runner had the same problem, though not as badly—he could see it handling like it was lighter weight, anyway.

But he nursed the whining engine until they were neck and neck, the 4Runner on Kumiko’s side of the car. She was tapping the barrel of her pistol against the door, annoying him with the noise. Then she rolled the window down all three inches it would go, poked the gun out the gap, and started firing.

“Hey!” Dom didn’t know what the fuck she was up to, but shooting the driver of a car going seventy was a shit idea.

“Alexei is in there!”

The windows were tinted. Christ only knew if she was right about that. Dom swerved into the side of the SUV, smacking into it solidly. Metal screeched and scraped, and Kumiko pulled back into the car, off-balance. As soon as he pulled away again, though, she was back at the gap. They were only a few inches from the other vehicle; even with all the swerving and accelerating, she wouldn’t be able to miss if she tried.

Pop pop. Pop pop. Two-shot bursts like she knew what she was doing. Dom could hear the splinter of glass.

Then the SUV was braking hard. He took the opening, swerving in front of them and braking too. They slowed almost as fast as he did, bumping up against his bumper and then coming to a stop right in the middle of the freeway, clouds of CS gas pouring from the open doors as Bratva spilled out. Dom pulled ahead a cautious handful of meters and pulled a U turn so he could shine his headlights on the whole clusterfuck.

A couple Bratva footsoldiers stumbled through the gas clouds, and several shorter, thinner shapes, clinging to each other as they bent over, coughing their guts out. Kids.

Letty’s Evo slid to a stop on the Las Vegas side of the SUV, headlights casting warring shadows through the haze, and Mia popped out of the passenger side. She must have been the one who got off the gas canister. “Elida!” she called out, waving at the kids.

Pop pop. Dom swung his head around to see Kumiko fire out the window, then yank the door open impatiently, step out and fire again. He tumbled out after her, tranq gun in his hand again.

A Bratva stood on the edge of the smoke, a black shape of a man with his arms raised to fire in Mia’s direction. Dom shot him without hesitation, the airier beep of the tranq gun going off at the same time as the pop of Kumiko’s pistol. The man took a step and dropped—dead or asleep, Dom didn’t know and didn’t really care.

Kumiko looked fucking scary, white bandana around her face again, but now smeared with blood. She walked into the smoke like some kind of action hero, gun up. One Bratva had taken cover around the back corner of the 4Runner, still in the smoke but more protected from the gunfire than he would have been bolting out into the dark scrubland beside the road. Dom could hear him hacking.

“Alexei!” Kumiko shouted, then something in Japanese. “Come out, you pig!”

A glimpse of movement in the corner of his eye made Dom turn. A third Bratva strode around the other side of the car, automatic pistol splaying wildly. His spray of bullets was going wide and high, but he’d correct it quick.

Dom raised the tranq gun and fired, but he heard it miss, the tranq striking the SUV with a sharp clank. The Bratva lowered the pistol in Kumiko’s direction, but his gaze swung toward Dom. Before he could correct his aim, Dom fired again, and missed again. The fucking tranqs didn’t fly through the air as reliably as bullets did—they were bigger, less aerodynamic. Sometimes they missed.

Two shots rang out and the Bratva in front of him slumped to the ground. Dom swept at his eyes—they were streaming from the cloud of CS gas he was standing in—and saw Mia on the other side of the footsoldier, holding a pistol. She ticked up her chin, too far away to say anything, and turned her attention to the guy Kumiko was shooting at.

Where was Brian in this mess? The thought darted through Dom’s head but he couldn’t catch hold of it when Kumiko was striding toward the last Bratva.

She shouted in Japanese, and the Bratva shouted back in the same language. Dom raised the tranq gun to end the stupid conversation and keep Kumiko from doing anything crazier than she was already. But it was out of darts. He growled, frustrated, and threw it at the Bratva’s head, making him duck if nothing else.

He didn’t have any other weapons. This entire situation was out of control. He curled his hands into fists.

“Dom!” The voice filtered through the smoke, the engines still running, the sound of kids shouting. Mia?

“Dom! Heads up!” No, it was Letty. Dom strained to see through the smoke. He picked up the
roar of engines a second before he saw them: two hulking shapes dark in the smoke, coming up on them fast.

Kumiko fired at the last Bratva. Dom couldn’t tell if it was the guy he’d seen outside Daisy’s house. It must be, from the way Kumiko was screaming at him. The guy collapsed to one knee, face contorting, his gun barking.

The two vehicles coming up the highway weren’t slowing down.

Kumiko fired again. The Bratva guy fired back, a line of bullets spraying from his minigun like stitches across the road.

Kumiko screamed.

Dom swung his head toward her but then the two dark SUVs were roaring past: the first, the twin of the Bratva Durango with the blown tire, the second, close on its tail, a Mercedes G Class with a sunroof and a woman half out of it, slung low on the roof as she aimed a rifle at the Bratva SUV’s tires.

Dom took a step toward Kumiko in time to catch her as she fell and dragged her back toward the Escalade. The minigun had only hit her once, but it was a direct hit to the solid center of her right thigh: the bone was probably shattered, the meat of it torn and blood everywhere.

He laid her down on the back seat, stripping his t-shirt off and pressing it to the wound. It wasn’t enough; blood soaked the fabric, smearing onto his hands as he shifted his weight to press harder.

Several gunshots rang out behind him, and he risked a glance up over the Escalade’s door to see Letty standing over the Bratva Kumiko had been so intent on shooting. Letty had a pistol out, too—the guy was definitely dead now if he hadn’t been already. She was gorgeous, her red dress swirling around her legs, her hair falling down out of its elaborate curls, over the knot of the bandana that covered her face, tumbling over her shoulders. He felt a sudden pang of loss—not the time or place for it but *dios mio* she was so beautiful.

A roar of an engine: the Mercedes was making a U turn, spinning back toward them. It jolted to a stop a few meters short of Letty.

She held her gun loosely, ready but not aggressive. Dom wished he had a gun. Kumiko’s pistol had fallen away out of her loose fingers when he was carrying her—he didn’t know where it was. Fuck.

Shouts passed over his head; he couldn’t make out the words. He raised his head again and saw that Mia was covering Letty, a bead drawn on the newcomers over the hood of the Evo. His throat hurt, from shouting or CS gas or panic. Where the fuck was Brian?

More shouting, and then Letty lowered her gun, stepped away from the body on the ground. A woman got out of the Mercedes; she was tiny, her hair tied back in a long braid, and she moved sharply and precisely like a bird.

Kumiko groaned, and Dom pressed harder on her leg. The blood wasn’t coming so fast that he was worried her artery was nicked, but she wasn’t in good shape. Some combination of pain and shock was making her incoherent but wasn’t enough to put her under.

A red shape sped up the highway, cutting through the smoke like butter, darted around the scattered cars on the road without slowing down, and raced after the lone escaping SUV.

*Brian.*

What the fuck was he doing? Not that Dom would object to taking the last of the Bratva out, but not in one fucking Miata.

“Hey!” Dom shouted and waved a hand to get Letty’s attention.

She sprinted over, took in Kumiko’s shivering whimpers, and leaned over, pressing the cloth to the wound. “Get Mia!” She waved back toward the smoke. “There’s a first aid kit in my car!”

Dom nodded, darting away. The Mercedes was sprouting gunmen, dressed not in Bratva suits but in whatever. T-shirts, jeans. They all looked Central American. Dom didn’t like that they were there, but they weren’t shooting at anyone, just holding rifles like they were guarding against the Bratva coming back. And Brian was going after those assholes alone. Why? This had started out so neatly and now—seconds ticked away.

Mia saw the blood on his hands and grabbed the first aid kit out of the Evo before he even got there. She held it up to hand it over, but he shook his head. “Run it up to the Escalade, will you? Letty’s there with Kumiko.” He glanced over at the wide-eyed kids Mia had pulled out of the SUV and stashed behind whatever safety the Evo’s engine block had given them. The closest girl barely had curves, she was so young. Dom grit his teeth. “Take them with you. It’s not bad,” he lied. He needed a car with NOS if he was going to catch up to Brian after so long. “I’m going after him.”

Mia tilted her head at him sharply, lips tight and judging. But then she darted forward and kissed his cheek, then took off. The kids followed her surprisingly easily. Or maybe not so surprisingly—sticking with Mia was as safe as they were going to get out here.
Brian heard voices coming from his phone, still on speaker and tucked into the cupholder. But he wasn’t paying attention. There was one more vehicle, that second Dodge, with another handful of kids in it sailing away to be sold off. The Bratva driver was flooring it, so far ahead Brian could barely see him. At least he could see him, now. Brian had gotten slowed by the total mess on the road, and the Durango had almost gotten away until Rome’s shouting in the phone registered in Brian’s ear.

For half a second he’d considered letting the vehicle get away. It was only one, and they’d saved more than twice as many kids as they knew existed—he had to remember to curse Kumiko out for that. How the fuck had she missed the fact that there were multiple vehicles?—and he had no idea how he was going to blockade an SUV with a single Miata. The road ahead was narrow and had a predictable gentle slope upward, curving back and forth through the foothills: not a lot of opportunity for trickery, and he had to catch them first.

But the Bratva had almost certainly seen at least one or two of them. They’d driven right past Letty standing in the road in her bright red dress. He didn’t have time to think about it; he wasn’t going to let them just race off to report who had done this. Maybe he wouldn’t shoot them in cold blood, but Rome had already zip-tied and hooded the first couple footsoldiers they’d hijacked. He’d do the same with these assholes, and strip them and drop them into a cargo train headed for Canada if he had to.

He pressed the accelerator flat to the floor, his heart pounding fast and furious. The rip of the engine, the way the body of the car pressed in around him—he cut through the air like his eyes were his hands were the steering column were his wheels. A predator, a sleek one, built for speed. He was going to kick these motherfuckers’ asses. Somehow.

A choppier roar rolled up behind him like thunder, gaining on him like only a boosted engine could. He glanced over his shoulder and caught Letty’s Evo throwing sparks out the exhaust off his left hand side. Letty wasn’t in the driver’s seat, though. Dom grinned across the inches of space that separated the cars.

“Holy shit, man, I’m glad to see you.”

Brian waited, but Dom’s voice didn’t come through the phone. “Dom? Dom, are you there?”

“Nah, cuz.” It was Rome. “We got phones down.”

“Fuck.” Brian looked ahead. The Durango’s taillights disappeared behind a curve before reappearing again. He was gaining on them, of course, but they were already almost a mile away from Letty and the others. “Fine. OK.”

He reached over and thumbed off the phone, tossing it into the passenger-side wheel well. Dom was the only one he needed to communicate with now, and the distraction of the phone wasn’t helping.

He glanced over again. Dom was still pacing him, patiently. Both the Evo and the Miata were capable of going faster but he needed to think. It would be easy to dog the Durango until it rolled—it had a high center of gravity, and none of the Bratva were outstanding drivers. But if there were kids in there, rolling the thing could hurt them. He needed to stop it—blockade it—without getting his ass shot.

He looked over at Dom, catching his eye for a long second. He couldn’t help but feel a thrill. They might both die but goddamn if they weren’t going to die at high speed.

The road curved under him, gentle. This far away from the mess of gunshots and headlights, the night was perfectly still, each car’s headlights streaking small as shooting stars. The dark was both good and bad: it might save the two of them from getting shot but it wouldn’t make the Bratva safer drivers.

Dom cocked his head, accelerated, and Brian grinned as he followed him.
Coming up behind the Bratva's Durango, Brian could feel Dom deciding to go left a split second before he did it. They split around the Durango at the same time, Brian going right, cutting along the shoulder. You couldn’t really box a car in with only two cars, but the road was narrow and he and Dom were on the same wavelength, moving in sync. They both swooped around the Durango, pulled up in front and started to brake. The Durango jerked back, seeming annoyed.

Brian glanced at the road ahead but kept most of his attention on his mirrors. He could see the face of the footsoldier driving; he half-recognized him as someone who had picked Daisy up from more than one drunken revel. Other shapes moved fretfully in the backseat: a couple of kids, at least one more soldier.

Brian slowed until his back bumper scraped against the Durango’s grill. He tapped the brakes, tapped them again. His Miata didn’t have the mass to actually stop the thing, but he could threaten them with a wreck if they didn’t cooperate. Dom was helping, the side of the Evo almost close enough to scrape the Miata, his bumper forming a wall with Brian’s.

The driver of the Durango slammed on the brakes, freaked out, and space opened up between the cars. Brian grinned at Dom and slowed further.

A motion from inside the Durango twitched in the mirror and he reacted on instinct, peeling off to the side as gunshots cracked through the air. Missed. But the gunman was aiming again out the SUV’s passenger-side window.

Brian braked as hard as he could, the Durango rocketing past. Just as it cleared the front of his car, he twisted the wheel and clocked the back corner, just enough to jostle the gunman and send his shots wild. Dom was on the other side of the car.

The road was rising a little, blocky stone on one side and to the southeast, dropping off into a steep slope. It made the road itself feel narrower, the shoulders shaved down to just a few inches on each side. But he and Dom both knew how to work two lanes. Like crows dive-bombing an owl, they harassed the SUV, slowing it from a respectable 70 mph down to 40. Slower going was more dangerous for them: the gunman wasn’t running out of bullets anytime soon.

A shot broke off his right hand mirror and Brian grimaced. They were fucking lucky there wasn’t more than two footsoldiers in this car. As it was, he didn’t really have an endgame: stop the car, sure, but then there was still going to be a guy with a gun.

Brian swung around, back in front of the Durango. The gunman was getting angry; he couldn’t hear to tell what the guy was shouting, but from his body language it was probably curses. The guy lined up a shot and Brian braked hard, letting the Durango smack into his rear end.

His poor Miata. But at least it shook the guy hard enough that he scrambled back inside the window, disappearing behind the smoked glass. Brian let up on the brakes, getting a little space. Dom was behind the Durango, the Evo barely visible from his vantage. Brian braced for Dom to nudge the Durango with the nose of the Evo—poor Evo, too—but the Durango braked even harder, opening up more space and driving Dom back.

Then, as they started to take a curve, the Durango’s driver slammed on the gas, jabbing forward. Brian reacted too slowly, pressing the gas himself too late to soften the blow much. The Durango smashed into the back of the Miata, whipping his head forward.

He lost track of his vision for a split second. He could still feel the car around him, the road underneath. He knew where he was. But the wheel or his hands were reacting just a hair too slow.

He spun the wheel, struggling for control as the Miata wobbled.

Noise behind him—gunshots?—and then the Durango hit the Miata again, off-center. Brian curved into it, making the Durango curve as well, turning it almost perpendicular to the road. It had to stop now, he thought. The job finished, then—he felt a surge of glee, of pride, too fast to turn into words or even images but tied up with Dom, with doing his part for the team. With kicking the Bratva’s ass, stopping them.

The road wasn’t letting the Miata stop. The little car was so damn small, it didn’t take barely anything to lift the wheels off the pavement and toss it into the curve of the highway, spinning up, weightless for a moment, and then whirling, smashing, crashing glass and metal all around him as he spun. Wheels off the ground, there was nothing he could do but ride it out and hope the ditch wasn’t deep enough to kill him when he hit.

# #

Dom heard the crash before he saw it, the shriek of metal. And then the Miata turning side-over-side off the road. The Durango blocked his view of Brian’s car and Dom felt like a hand grabbed his throat, choking him. He wanted to cry out but couldn’t.

Letty is always prepared, he thought, and reached around behind him to the pocket hidden in the fabric over the driver’s seat and drew the pistol he hadn’t realized he knew would be there.

It was like he was watching himself from one remove. His body moving without him. There were
already bullet holes in the windshield and dents in the panels; he would owe Letty a complete rebuild no matter what. Fine.

A couple well-placed thumps of the butt of the gun got the spider-webbed glass out of his way. Then it was easy to sight down on the Durango’s wheels. They weren’t going particularly fast; he steered with his left and aimed the gun with his right.

It took four shots, but with their rear tires destroyed the Durango had to stop or lose control.

Brian was already in the rearview, one headlight still shining in the dark off the side of the road, in his peripheral vision. Dom locked down everything in his head, not thinking about what he had to do.

He passed the Durango as it was stopping and spun the Evo to greet the driver up close and personal through his windshield. The guy was pulling his own gun, but Dom was already aiming. Two shots to the chest; he figured they had the best chance of not going through and hitting the kids in the back. He didn’t like shooting around kids but seconds were slipping away from him.

He punched the gas, sliding along the side of the Durango so close he almost scraped paint, cutting a turn so sharp his back wheels sent up smoke rounding the back. One more Bratva. He could leave him there but there were kids in the back and who knew what the soldier would do to them if he was desperate to get away. Dom took a breath, hands completely steady: left on the top of the steering wheel bracing the gun in his right hand as he slid around smooth and came up the side of the Durango where the Bratva was opening the door.

Split-second decision: he slammed on the brakes instead of ripping off the car door, let the guy stick his head out, took the shot.

It surprised him how clean it was. He’d made them all start practicing, after LA, after he made himself get real about the work he was choosing to do. He’d made Leon set up bottles and cans after the races, before the barbecues. But he hadn’t realized how good a shot he’d gotten. He didn’t even have to get out of the car.

Dom pulled forward a few feet and looked. The guy was slumped into the footwell, door stuck open where he’d tipped forward. He put a couple more bullets in his back—one two real quick, not even thinking about it—craned his neck around to make sure the kids in the back seat were fine, and wrenched the wheel to the right, smoking the tires he took off so quickly for the spot on the road where the little red Miata had disappeared over the shoulder.

Brian lost track of where his car was in space, which way was up. He spun, the roll bars ringing out wildly as they struck stone, his head and shoulders being thrown around. A cacophony of smashing glass and crunching panels, rattling loudly in his skull—he’d put in the roll bars, and the racing seat belt, and pretended to Daisy that he’d bought the car that way off Craigslist, like he didn’t know anything about cars. Now they saved his life once, twice, as the car hit the rocks, floated weightlessly, hit the ground again and slid, metal screaming wildly.

Finally it came to a rest—maybe a second and a half after the flip started. The silence felt sudden, no more engine noise. The engine had cut off, smashed into dysfunction.

Cool air blew over his face; the roof had been completely ripped away. Above him the night sky was inky black. The Milky Way stretched out like a highway through the stars, like if he’d landed other side up he could have driven off into space, gravity not able to hold him.

Brian settled his hands on the wheel. He was upright. It was fucking lucky he was alive, and moving. The last three fingers on his right hand were scraped raw along the top, skin sliced away by flying glass.

His other arm hurt worse—broken? He blinked at the windshield, so cracked and covered in dust he couldn’t see through it. Only the glare of a single white headlight still shining.

The SUV. Dom. Fuck.

Brian fumbled with the seat belt, trying to unlatch it. Little wisps of gray smoke leaked out the air vents, smelling of oil and transmission fluid.

There wasn’t any NOS anywhere in the Miata’s build. He’d wanted to put it in there, but now he was glad Rome had talked him out of it. The seatbelt wasn’t coming loose and he didn’t know if the car was about to go up in smoke. But at least there wasn’t any NOS, he told himself. Fire didn’t mean he was about to explode.

He yanked on the seatbelt in frustration and gave up on the latch. His hands wanted to shake but he refused to let them. He could climb out of the seatbelt, probably, the roof was gone so he could just slide up the seat and out the top. But even with his good hand pulling him up the roll bars, he couldn’t get his legs underneath him. The seatbelt clasped him too tightly.

He struggled until his arm screamed at him and he slumped, forehead on the wheel, blinking away the pain. He had had a small knife in the glove box, but that whole side of the car was a crumpled mess of metal and upholstery and glass. He couldn’t even see where the glove box would be anymore.

Good thing he hadn’t had a passenger. That side of the car had taken the first hit, right off the
A sound outside the car jerked his head up. Fuck, that was a bad idea: pain rocketed through his neck and shoulders, whiting out his vision.

When he blinked the spots out of his eyes, Dom was wrenching the door open. It creaked resistance for half a second, he heard Dom cursing at it, and then suddenly it was gone, almost ripped off the car, hanging on by a single hinge and tilting crazily away.

“Dom.” He couldn’t get his thoughts together. Dom looked furious, wild, his bandana pulled down around his neck like a bandit, barely any light so his face was mostly shadows.

“Bri. You alright?”

When Brian just blinked at him, Dom’s scowl deepened. He reached for the seatbelt trapping Brian in the car, slicing it away with a knife that just appeared in his hand. Brian had never thought a lot about how gentle Dom could be, but Dom’s hands on him, lifting him up out of the wreck, were gentle and warm, never pulling enough to hurt. Steady.

“Dom.” Brian spoke into Dom’s shoulder. His feet were holding him up but his thoughts were still cloudy. He was sloshing with adrenaline, shaking with it. “Fuck. Did that Durango get away?”

“Nah, we’re good.”

“The Bratva? They can ID us, I think.” He held onto Dom’s shirt with his good hand—the one that was just cut up. He was bleeding onto Dom’s shirt, he noticed, and not just where his fingers were raw. He must have a cut on his face somewhere. His face was bare; he’d lost his mask in the crash.

“I said we’re good.”

It was so tempting to just believe him.

Dom put both his hands on Brian’s sides, on his ribs, still taking his weight but pulling back enough to look him over. “You injured?”

Brian took a breath and surveyed his body. “Left arm.” He flexed his toes. His legs were fine, apart from what felt like bruises on his knees where he’d been knocked around. Unlike a head-on collision, the flip hadn’t driven the engine back into the body of the car. Dom’s hands were hot on his sides. “I’m a little dizzy.”

Dom caught his eye. Checking his pupils, probably, if there was even enough light to see. Brian couldn’t help but look back, eyes wide, defenses down. Dom’s hands, still on his sides, were lighting him up, and they were standing so close Brian could feel the air shift as Dom breathed. Behind Dom, the stars were very bright. His own blood pumped through him in surges, the belated fight-or-flight reaction turning up his hearing until every tiny crunch of gravel under their feet sounded like another car crash.

“Dom—” He stopped. Dom’s eyes flickered over Brian’s face, tiny little movements. If Brian leaned forward just a few inches they’d be kissing, and then Dom would straight up murder him. He felt like he might lean forward and kiss him anyway.

“Bri.” Dom looked down, running his hands down Brian’s sides to his hips, then up to his shoulders and down his arms. Checking for injuries. Brian stood there and took it, trying not to shiver too pathetically. He wasn’t sure how much of this ache was from the crash and how much was just wanting.

Dom’s hands were gentle on his left arm, but Brian couldn’t help but wince at the pressure on his forearm. It must’ve impacted with the door at some point; it was already swelling up and there was a gash a couple inches long along the outside. He was lucky it hadn’t been torn off.

Abruptly, Dom let Brian’s arm go. Brian sagged back, leaning a little bit on the frame of the car. It wouldn’t hold him up if he put his full weight on it, but he needed something to ground him. Dom was touching him and Brian couldn’t—Dom reached forward and cupped his hand around the back of Brian’s skull, pulling Brian’s face back in against his chest. *Italian, remember?* Brian told himself, his own hands coming up to Dom’s waist automatically. He couldn’t help himself; Dom was so warm and solid. *He manhandles people. It’s not what it feels like.*

“I was wrong.” Dom said. Brian felt the rumble of his voice in his bones. “That Miata’s a better car than I thought.”

“Told you,” Brian said, glad his voice was muffled. Dom wasn’t acting like he’d expected him to. It was too dark to tell what Dom was thinking, if he really meant to be tender instead of disgusted or angry. Would he treat any of his crew like this? Brian couldn’t think straight. The wild rush of adrenaline was fucking with his emotions. He pressed his eyes closed to keep the hot tears inside.

They stood there for another breath and then Brian made himself pull away before he completely lost the will to do anything but cling. Dom let go immediately, stepping away with a strange expression on his face. Brian couldn’t read it in the dark. “What about the kids?” he asked belatedly.

Dom grimaced. “Left them with the SUV. Didn’t want them in the way if you were bleeding out.”
Brian forced himself to take a step back toward the road. Yeah, his knees were going to hurt like a motherfucker tomorrow. Better to think about that than about the way Dom had touched him.

“We’d better collect them.”

Dom nodded and paced him back to the car, clearly making sure Brian wasn’t about to fall over as he picked his way uphill over the uneven rocks.

At the edge of the blacktop, Brian looked back and whistled. “That was a fucking wreck, wasn’t it?” The Miata was a good hundred meters off the road, down a slope of loose scree. From this distance, it looked like no one could have survived that bust up.

“I think Letty keeps incendiaries in her car,” Dom offered. “I can hustle over and burn it if there’s identifying info in there.”

Brian shook his head and then winced when his neck screamed at him. “It’s not even on a fake ID; when I bought it there were still ten months on the registration. I paid cash, never turned in the title paperwork. There’s nothing there to find.”

“You’re not worried they’ll check for fingerprints?”

“Shit.” Brian closed his eyes. His thoughts were more scattered than he’d realized if he hadn’t thought of that. “If they figure out this is an organized crime thing, they might be pretty thorough, you’re right.”

Dom huffed out a short laugh and waved Brian into the passenger seat of the Evo. He grabbed supplies out of the back of the car and loped back to the wreck, much faster without Brian shuffling along beside him.

Brian watched the Miata go up. The flames licked up into the black sky, popping softly as the incendiaries bloomed. He kept his eye on Dom as best he could, but it hurt to turn his neck too much, and he lost him in the dark. Then Dom was opening the car door and sliding behind the wheel.

Brian couldn’t help but watch him drive back up to the wreck of the SUV, shifting gears quickly and smoothly like the transmission was an extension of his nervous system. He knew he looked lovesick, knew he was setting himself up to get abandoned once this job was finished. He had invaded Dom’s space in every possible way. Now Brian was even bleeding on his car. Letty’s car—but the invasion of space was the same. Dom was going to shake him off as soon as he could; this illusion of closeness was very temporary. Might as well look while he could.

So Brian watched, memorizing the way the muscles in Dom’s arms flexed as he changed gears, as he steered up the winding highway. Dom had to know he was watching but he didn’t glance over.

And then they were at the Durango, and Brian had to smile kindly at a pair of frightened, skinny kids who stared at his bloody face with dark eyes and refused to speak English to him.

Dom murmured at them in Spanish, getting them into the back of the Evo, while Brian stumbled over to the Durango and went over it quickly. He didn’t touch it—didn’t want to leave his fingerprints or make it look like anyone had been here but Bratva idiots. But he wanted to make sure it wasn’t carrying anything else important. Brian saw the two footsoldiers with bullets in them; Dom saw him looking and glared like he was daring Brian to say something about it, but Brian didn’t. This whole job was a fucking shitshow, but it wasn’t Dom’s fault.
Dom drove back up the highway, trying not to stare at Brian. He couldn’t help but keep glancing over, but he tried to be subtle about it at least. And there was enough blood on Brian’s face that he had an excuse for checking on him. He wasn’t sure how concussed Brian was, but for the moment it didn’t matter; he’d worry about medical care later, when he could do something about it. Delayed panic was trying to creep up his throat but he locked it down and locked it down. This wasn’t over.

It was further back up the highway than he remembered driving. A couple of miles at least—now the drive back felt weirdly long. The kids in the back seat whispered to each other suspiciously. Coming up on the bloody scene in the middle of the highway was almost a relief, even if it was oddly quiet. Five cars splayed out across the concrete but when he parked the Evo off the side of the highway behind the smashed up Escalade and turned off the engine there was no engine noise. Just voices rising up into the thin desert air.

The scene was lit by the headlights of the Mercedes G Class parked near the Escalade, its headlights pointing back toward Vegas. On the other side of the shot-up 4Runner, Leon leaned against the side of Dom’s Civic, arms crossed belligerently, the Civic lighting up the scene from the opposite direction. Also on the Vegas side was another car Dom didn’t recognize, with a couple more of that Central American-looking crew standing beside it on the receiving end of Leon’s glare.

The cars formed a rough box, and in the middle was the Bratva 4Runner. Alexei Polzin had been directing this whole shipment from inside that car, Dom figured, trying to think it through calmly. If he was putting the pieces together, Kumiko had known that, seen something in their computers that tipped her off, and she’d kept it secret—why? Afraid that they’d change the job if they knew, and she wouldn’t get a chance to shoot the guy? Maybe.

Dom didn’t like letting Brian out of arms’ reach, but someone had to usher the kids out of the Evo and over to the side of the road, out of the light, along to where Mia stood with at least a dozen other kids. Maybe more than a dozen. It was hard to tell in the dark, the strange lighting casting tricky shadows, and the kids kept moving.

He stepped forward into the light with one last glance after Brian’s limping form, and scanned the scene, fighting down the pressure rising in his head. The 4Runner sat in the middle of the road, at least two bodies laid out flat on the concrete beside it. Letty stood on the shoulder of the Vegas-approaching side of the road, her dress lit by the crossed lights like she wasn’t quite real.

Beside her, one of the strangers, a woman, gestured. The woman had a pistol holstered on her back, between her shoulder blades; otherwise she was dressed in loose jeans, a canvas jacket, boots: utilitarian. Definitely the boss, though, by the way everyone was looking at the two of them talking. Definitely the one who had helped Kumiko fuck this job sideways.

Dom stood at a little distance for a moment, arms folded, watching Letty talk. They were speaking Spanish; the woman had a Cuban accent, which was as much confirmation as he needed. His lungs sucked in air like a bellows, stoking whatever this feeling was like a tornado in his chest.

Letty glanced over at him, fast, ticking up her chin to acknowledge his presence, and he felt something snap in his chest with a nearly physical pop. He stalked forward, arms swinging free at his sides.

“So if you look at it my way, we did you a favor and you owe us,” Letty was saying. Dom stepped past her and kept going, his momentum carrying him right into the stranger’s space. He swung, nearly blind the blood in his temples was pounding so hard.

“Mucho gusto.”
Dom didn’t return Yamilé’s greeting. He rolled his shoulders, feeling his lip pull back in a curl that wasn’t a smile.

Letty glared at him. “The Cubans have been eyeing the Bratva here, so it turns out we just punched a hole in their main competitor’s operations.”

Dom unlocked his jaw. “They set us up.”

Yamilé shook her head. “We just happened to be on the same road.”

“Just happened to be?” Dom’s throat hurt from the effort of talking. It was pure anger he was feeling, he thought. Not fear. He was so angry he was shaking. “Was getting Kumiko shot part of your plan? Did you discuss that with her?”

“What?” Letty said sharply.

Dom kept his stare on Yamilé. “They were talking to Kumiko. For days at least.”

Yamilé shifted her weight uncomfortably as Letty’s eyes narrowed. “We were… aware of her, and her vendetta against Alexei Polzin. She took out several of his associates in Tokyo last year after a turf dispute with the Inagawa-kai yakuza got rough. At first we thought she was working for the yakuza, but when we found her here in Las Vegas, we saw it was personal. And since our goals aligned… You can’t blame us for contacting her.”

“She sold us out?” Letty hissed. “That bitch!”

“Her shot for it,” Dom said grimly. “Which is on her head. But it’s pure luck that the rest of us are walking away from this. You didn’t see Brian’s car. Letty. It’s totaled. More than totaled—flattened.” He pulled a breath in through his nose. “Had to burn it.”

Letty took over the conversation, keeping her hand on the center of his chest like she was still holding him back. She was letting him chew through the anger. If Brian had been seriously hurt, or—he would have pulled Letty’s pistol out of his waistband and shot Yamilé in the face. He would have—

“We took care of your Polzin problem for you,” Letty said. “Like I said, you owe us.”

Yamilé tilted her head, almost a nod: not agreeing aloud but conceding the point.

“Ay, Yami!” One of the Cuba men called over from the open door of the Mercedes. “Got 5-0 on the radio, reports of a disturbance. Fifteen minutes out.”

Letty turned. “Leon!” she called out, and made a circle-up gesture.

“You can start paying us back by cleaning up this crime scene,” Dom said. “You’ve got the people here, and you can see we’re busy.” He ticked his head in the direction of the wide-eyed kids huddled on the edge of the light.

“You didn’t have a plan for clean up?”

Dom didn’t like the condescension in her voice. “We had a plan for cleaning up one van,” he growled. “You got us bad info, you take clean up.”

Yamilé clenched her jaw. “Fine.”

Dom turned away before he lunged for her smug face again. She let all of them—she let Brain, she let Mia—walk into a firefight unprepared; she was lucky he was too busy to start a fucking war.

Brian led the pair of kids from the Evo toward the group of teenagers Mia was corralling on the side of the road away from the wrecked 4Runner.

A couple of Central American-looking men stood near the conversation happening between Letty and the small woman who’d gotten out of the Mercedes G class. Another stranger was searching the 4Runner that sprawled in the middle of the road, wiping down surfaces for fingerprints as he went. A dead man lay on the pavement; beside him, unconscious Bratva with their hands zippered behind their backs and pillowcases around their heads lay like logs. It had only been a few minutes since he and Dom broke ahead, but it felt like it had been hours.

Left arm tucked against his side, he looked around. They needed to get off the road before some civilian came by and called the cops. It was dark, and he didn’t know what time it was, but it was late—but this was a state highway. There would be traffic eventually.

A scrape of boot sole against concrete caught his attention. Over by Letty, Dom was moving, striding forward, fists up. Brian lurch forward a step but Mia grabbed his arm, hard. He saw almost instantly that her instincts were good: the whole road was frozen, the Central Americans bringing their guns up sharply. There was no way he could get to Dom before they all got shot.

Brian watched, not breathing, as Letty talked Dom down, apologized to the strangers. It was the smart move, as much as it chafed. Dom’s crew was outgunned and scattered.

Fuck, his head was throbbing. It was hard to see Dom so obviously furious with how the job had
turned out. Right now he was blaming the strangers, but Brian felt a cold knot in his stomach at the thought that he would eventually start realizing that Brian was the one who got them all into this in the first place. It was his fault.

“Brian.” Mia tugged hard on his arm, eyes still stuck on the tense conversation across the road.

“What?” his stomach sank. “Whatever it is, just tell me, Mia.”

She hesitated, glancing away at the whispering teenagers. Christ, some of them looked like they were barely teenagers; one of the boys barely looked ten.

“Mia.”

“I don’t know what you heard on the phones,” she said. “Kumiko got shot. But she’s not—she’s, like, not in great shape but I think she’ll be okay. The Ximenez jefe here—” she nodded over at the woman Dom had taken a swing at—“has a car so Letty’s trying to get her to take Kumiko to the emergency room. Kumiko and the kid who got shot.”

Brian grimaced. Shit on more shit. Gunshot wounds in an emergency room were going to raise questions he’d much rather none of them ever had to answer. If the authorities got out here before they could scrub the scene… He closed his eyes. It wasn’t supposed to happen like this, but then that was kind of a theme with his life lately. Everything was so fucked up. No wonder Dom was punching people. “One of the kids got shot?”

“Yeah. She got hit in the gut.”

“Fuck.” It hurt like a motherfucker when he shook his head. “She going to make it?”

“I think so. It’s not as bad as it could be. I think the bullet went through a car panel before it hit her, and the Ximenez have a medic taking care of her.”

“Where’s Kumiko?”

“Over there.” Mia gestured across the road at a dark Peugeot sedan that was parked on the shoulder. “With Rome.”

“Okay.” Brian lingered for a second, scanning the scene. There were a lot of strangers on the road with them, a lot of rifles that could be pointed at Dom or at anyone in a split second. He didn’t like it.

“They’re together, right?” Mia was watching the newcomers—the Ximenez gang, he guessed—with hooded eyes. “So at least Rome’s with her.”

“Who, Rome and Kumiko? No.” Brian blinked. “Kumiko has a boyfriend, he’s getting out of prison in Japan in a couple months.”

“Mm.” Mia’s expression didn’t change. The Ximenez jefe who was talking to Letty nodded sharply and gestured to her people. Several of the dark-clad newcomers jogged over to the 4Runner and went to work on it. Brian cocked his head, watching. They should have been stripping it, wiping it down for evidence, but instead they were sweeping glass off the seats—oh, of course. Mia gestured to the kids. “Come on, we’re going to take you to your abuelas.”

“Ain’t got no abuela,” one of the boys said, arms crossed meanly over his chest.

“Whoever.” Mia cocked her head impatiently. “We’re working for Mrs. Garcia and Mrs. Perez, but if that’s not your abuela either way you’re still coming with us. We’re not leaving you in the desert.”

“You mean you don’t want us to talk to the cops,” the boy said sullenly, but he started walking. None of the kids was wearing anything less flimsy than a tank top, and he wasn’t the only one shivering.

Brian put one foot in front of the other and got himself across the road. His reluctance was only partly dizziness left over from the crash; Kumiko had fucked up. He was afraid to see how badly she was hurt, and he was pissed at her for the blindsided feeling that was making his headache worse.

Kumiko lay on someone’s jacket on the ground, just off the shoulder of the road. The hard desert pan was flat and smooth; that was about the only good thing about the scene. Her right leg was a mess of blood and gore from just above the knee. It didn’t look like she was bleeding strongly anymore, but the wad of cloth Rome was holding to her leg shone wetly in the weird light, dark with blood. A first aid kit gaped open on the ground beside her, several QuickClot gauze wrappers torn and discarded on the dirt.

Further along the shoulder, one of the Cubans knelt beside a girl who sat propped up against the wheel of the Peugeot. She was in better shape than Kumiko, or at least wasn’t so bloody.

“Christ,” Brian said, then immediately winced. You were supposed to pretend injuries weren’t that bad, right? At least until you got people to the hospital.

Rome glanced up at him. “Nah, it ain’t as bad as all that.”

Kumiko made a noise that might have been some kind of laugh. It sounded more like a bark.
“No, it ain’t,” he told her. “Missed the knee. You’re not bleeding to death. Hurts like a motherfucker, I know, but you’ll be alright. We’ll get you some morphine, stitch you up. Next year you’ll be telling people about that time you got shot by the Russian mob, it’ll be a great story.”

Kumiko lifted her hand a couple of inches and let it drop. “Sure,” she said faintly, voice slurring.

Rome’s glance at Brian was more worried than his words let on. Brian squatted down next to him. “He’s right,” he said, trying to make his tone convincing. “Don’t tell me you get scared of blood.”

Kumiko let out that bark-laugh again. “Fuck you,” she whispered. Brian found himself leaning toward her to hear better. After a breath, she continued. “Sorry…”

“For what? You didn’t get shot on purpose.” The lightness he tried to put in his voice fell flat.

“Should’ve told you.”

“What?” Brian frowned.

“About the Cubans, cuz. She and them were talking about this job.” Rome was losing his cheerfulness too. He leaned forward, pressing harder on the cloth on Kumiko’s leg, and she grunted. “Kumiko told them we’d be pulling it.”

“What the fuck.” Brian rocked back on his heels. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Kumiko struggled to raise her head. “Saw the emails. That Alexei would be here.” She dropped down again, panting with pain. “Had to fuck him up.”

Rome screwed up his mouth like he was tasting something bitter, but kept pressure on Kumiko’s wound.

“What the fuck,” Brian said again. It hurt, that sharp, too-familiar twist of betrayal in his gut. “Why the fuck didn’t you say something? You didn’t think you could trust me with a complication in the plan so you, what, you just didn’t say shit?”

“Come on, cuz.” Rome’s voice was low. “If you knew there’d be five cars full of Bratva, no way would you have sent your boy and his crew into this.”

Brian clenched his jaw, staring down at Kumiko. She had blood on her face, streaked fingerprints along one cheek and down her jaw. It made her look like a ghost. “We need to get Kumiko to a hospital,” he said finally, standing up.

“Yeah, my boy Rolando here is bringing up my car.” Rome tilted his head down the road, where a pair of headlights was approaching. “The Cubans know a doctor.”

“Not North Vista? The emergency room?”

Rome raised his eyebrows. “With a fucking gunshot wound?”

Brian frowned. Kumiko was alert, and didn’t contradict Rome, so whatever. Her call.

“You want me to go with?” Brian’s arm throbbed in time with the pulse in his temple; he should probably get it set. But he wasn’t sure he liked the idea of an undocumented doctor any more than he liked the idea of medical records showing his presence in Las Vegas. On the other hand…

“Want me to use my white boy charm to smooth the way?”

Rome looked up at him consideringly, then shook his head. “Nah, cuz. You look like a domestic violence poster, you ain’t smoothing shit.”

“You got your burner though, yeah?”

Rome ticked his chin up as the Cuban pulled up in Rome’s Camaro Z28, the white paint glowing against the dark. The driver got out and opened the passenger-side door, reclining the seat as much as he could, then helping the kid into the back behind the driver’s seat. At least the black leather interior wouldn’t show bloodstains, Brian thought grimly.

Brian and Rome gritted their teeth, locked gazes for a second in acknowledgement of how much this was going to suck, and together they lifted Kumiko off the ground and into the car. She whimpered, high pitched and pitiful, as they moved her. Brian swallowed hard, breathing through his nose in the pain in his own arm; it distracted him from feeling sympathy pain for Kumiko. He was angry at her anyway. He’d forgive her later, after she had to bump around in a 1971 Camaro all the way back to Las Vegas with a gunshot wound.

The Cuban climbed into the tight space in the back beside the kid and Rome pulled a U-turn, crossing paths with another couple of vehicles approaching from the direction of Las Vegas. Brian recognized the headlights: the first was an XLT, probably the first van they’d stopped so neatly on the road, almost zero damage except for the broken window in the back. The second was Vince in one of the Durangos, the first one that had blown out its tire—the tire had been swapped and it drove fine; there was no sign of the Bratva who had been driving it.

As Vince stepped out, one of the Cubans called out something Brian didn’t catch, and he looked over to see Letty making a ‘circle-up’ gesture. Beside her, Dom still looked furious. Brian made himself stay and help sort kids into vehicles. He wasn’t sure how much time they had, but
obviously faster was better, and the kids didn’t know what was going on or have any reason to do what they were told. Dom could take care of himself—he didn’t need Brian’s help.

Between the 4Runner—the only Bratva SUV that was still in driving shape—the two vans, the Durango Vince had appropriated, Letty’s Evo and Dom’s Civic, there were almost enough seats for everyone, and most of the kids were so little that they didn’t complain when Letty gave four of them the stink-eye and told them to figure out how to all sit in the three seats in the back of her Evo.

Brian volunteered to drive but Dom lifted his eyebrows and overruled him, and he didn’t protest. His head hurt, his neck hurt, his arm hurt, and he didn’t want Dom to be any angrier at him than he already was. He meant to get a seat in another car, maybe with Leon in the van, but somehow when all the kids were strapped in the only seat left was in the passenger seat in Dom’s Civic.

“Come on,” Dom said. “We’ve got miles to go still.”

Brian ducked his head and silently climbed in.

#

It took hours, of course. That many kids, even all pressed together in the back seat of what cars weren’t wrecked, was too much chaos to be handled, way more than they’d planned for. Some of the kids were quiet and compliant, some cried. One or two threw tantrums when they got to the transfer point in Kingman, Arizona, where Mrs. Garcia and the others waited. They’d called ahead to let them know there were three times as many kids as they’d planned for, but even though the women’s shelter people had seats in the cars to carry all the kids down to the safe houses they’d set up, not all the kids were happy about it. It was hard for them to see Elida and Angelo reunited with family when their own family wasn’t there, didn’t know where they were.

One of the boys, one of the older ones who had actually put on some teenage height, yelled at Mia, trying to get her to take him back to Las Vegas, back to the job he was so sure was going to be his.

“I’m a wicked good dealer, you don’t even know! Had me a blackjack table here but I ma make it big in Atlantic City. Pyotr was gon’ set me up, bitch. Gon’ make it big, and you ruined it! My grams needs that fucking money and you come in here with your fucking cars!”

Brian put a hand on his shoulder, trying to get him to back off—Mia didn’t need that shit, and they were all on edge because it was two a.m. after a long day—and the kid turned and swung at him, clumsily. Unthinking, Brian blocked the punch with his left wrist, turning it away and smashing pain through his wrist in the process.

He lost a moment blinking away the pain and when he opened his eyes again, Dom had the kid pushed up against the side of the Civic, arm wrenched behind him so he couldn’t move. “You don’t have to like it,” Dom growled at him. “But you do have to shut the fuck up and get in that van. And I better not hear about you giving Mrs. Perez any trouble.”

The kid ducked his head angrily, but he went.

Mrs. Perez gave Dom a worried look, as out of her depth as any of them.

Brian leaned back against the Civic himself and closed his eyes, trying to will away the pain in his arm. Siting in a car for hours wasn’t doing him any favors. He just wanted—he just wanted this fucking job to be done, finally. He’d figure out what hospital Kumiko was in, where Rome had gone to ground. He’d figure out—what he was doing with himself. But that all came after, after Dom finally cut him loose for the last time. He couldn’t figure out why Dom kept finding him again, kept angling his head and curling his finger at Brian to get him to come along. He knew Dom was furious with him, and he didn’t know why he didn’t just leave. Well, no, he knew: the job wasn’t fucking done yet, and it was Brian’s job, wasn’t it. So they’d all see it through, first.
That explanation made sense until the smattering of assorted cars the kids had been bundled into was nothing but dust falling onto the narrow two-lane highway in the headlights of Dom’s Civic and Letty’s Evo, and then Letty was peeling off with Mia and the others, leaving just him and Dom.

Dom would take him somewhere, he guessed dully. Drop him off. His go-bag was still in Rome’s Camaro, all the stuff he’d wanted to take with him after this job. Their townhouse was still full of the generic shit they’d stocked it with, furniture and dishes and whatever. Cleaned, though—if Daisy told Isay where Brian lived and the Bratva came through, there’d be no sign of where they’d gone. Not that Brian knew where he was going. Maybe if he asked nicely Dom would drop him off somewhere with medical care.

He couldn’t make himself say it, though, once he got in the car. He leaned back in the seat, his neck too sore to even tilt it to the side against the window, and drifted off into half-sleep, Dom driving calmly in the dark beside him.

Then they were in a 24-hour Urgent Care clinic in some tiny little town off the highway, and Brian was perched on the exam table, staring up at the florescent lights. Dom sat on a worn-down chair in the corner of the room while a PA stitched and splinted Brian’s left arm, plastered over the scabby wounds on the back of his right hand, and then put a couple of stitches in the cut on the side of his face that he’d nearly forgotten about. She gave him some painkillers, but he palmed them, already too fuzzy from fatigue and pain to risk losing track even more.

“I can—I can find my way from here, man,” he said, as casual as he could make it, into the empty space of the exam room when the PA stepped out.

Dom raised an eyebrow. “You gonna take a Greyhound? Or you gonna lift a car from one of these nice folks? Cause I don’t even know if the Greyhound stops around here.”

Brian sagged a little. He was trying to make this easy, but maybe Dom didn’t want easy.

“Relax, Bri.” Dom’s low voice shivered through him. “We’re good.”

Brian swallowed hard around the lump in his throat, wanting to cuss Dom out or cry or just—Christ—just sleep and wake up with everything not so fucked up, and Rome here, and Kumiko not shot and an asshole, and Dom already done with him so he didn’t have to anticipate it anymore. He missed the adrenaline that had been coursing through him. It’d lasted for hours but was long gone, and he was fucking feeling it.

“Just relax.” Dom reached out and curled his fingers around Brian’s ankle, gently, like he was afraid this was the only place he could touch that wouldn’t hurt.

It felt amazing, Dom’s hands on him. But knowing it was temporary, that it would be gone again, forever this time, as soon as Dom found somewhere to ditch him… that hurt more than the broken arm or the whiplash or anything Brian had ever felt.

Dom held on until the PA opened the door again. Then he let his fingers slide loosely down Brian’s foot like it wasn’t anything. The PA either didn’t notice or didn’t care; she handed a sheaf of aftercare instructions to Dom and gave them directions to the front desk to check out. She barely looked at either of them, as if she got grimy, bloody pairs of silent men in her clinic at five a.m. all the time.

Outside, the sun was just starting to think about coming up, faint on the edges of the low mountains that ringed this dinky little town he didn’t even know the name of. Brian paused in the parking lot, his fingertips on the handle of Dom’s car. Above him a single bird chirruped in a thorny tree that was still mostly shadow. “Look, man,” he started to say, and then stopped. It was stupid to force the issue now, when he needed sleep, and painkillers, and didn’t even have a car to bail him out of this fucking situation. His heart hurt, and for a second he remembered the smashed up body of his little Miata, flames taking it into the sky like some kind of warrior’s burial, and felt like he was going to cry.

“What?” Dom had stopped walking at the same time he had, still shadowing Brian closely like he was afraid he was going to fall over.

He should know better than to get freaked out by minor injuries, Brian thought irritably. “Don’t you have someplace to be?” he snapped. “Aren’t you meeting your crew up somewhere? You’re just hanging around here with me like—” he broke off, angry at himself more than anything.

“Where you going from here?” Dom’s voice was impossible to read.

Brian shrugged, trying to make himself relax. Be cool, asshole. “Nowhere in particular. Rome was saying Tokyo, but… Kumiko won’t be traveling for a while. And anyway I’m pissed at her for playing us like she did.”

Dom nodded. Brian took a step away, restless. Failing to be cool. Dom just looked at him levelly, and for once Brian didn’t have it in him to hold Dom’s gaze. He turned away and leaned against the side of the car, trying to play it like he was fine, he was just tired, just talking about nothing important.
“Come with me.” Dom paused. “The house, down in La Paz, it isn’t much. But the garage has plenty of room.”

Brian’s eyes snapped to meet Dom’s. In the dark, he couldn’t read Dom’s expression. There was something there, something dark and deep. “I—” he took a deep breath and made himself speak carefully in spite of the way his heart was beating out of his chest like he’d had a shot of atropine straight through his rib cage. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. This job has been… weird. And I could use a little breathing room before I try to be—” he looked away, unable to bear the intense wash of emotion swirling through him. “Before I try to be, uh, a team member. I mean.” He looked at Dom again. “I want that, don’t get me wrong. But I don’t think you want me forgetting and, like, kissing you. Or trying to. In front of people. Or whatever.”

Dom didn’t answer, which was kind of an answer, Brian guessed. It was a good thing he looked so pathetic right now; it didn’t seem like Dom was going to take a swing at him anyway. Although—Dom heaved a breath and frowned at Brian, his jaw flexing.

Then he blew out his breath, uncrossed his arms and reached out, taking hold of Brian’s elbow with gentle fingers. “Come with me.” There was a smile in his voice. Brian stared at him, mind revving uselessly. “I want you to.”

“You want me to—?” Emotion rose up in him like a great swell of air underwater, pressing his lungs and heart side to side. “What do you want?”

Dom stepped right into his space, his other hand coming up and bracketing Brian against the car. “Come with me,” he said again. “Be mine.”

Brian opened his mouth to answer but what the fuck was he going to say to that? Jesus. And then Dom kissed him. Thoughts tumbled through his head, disconnected. He felt like he should object but fuck if he was going to pull away from Dom’s mouth to do it.

Both of Brian’s hands were too bandaged up to be useful. He tried to get a grip on Dom’s sides, urge him deeper into the kiss, but he stayed maddeningly soft. Like he wasn’t committing to it. The thought was infuriating, that Dom would kiss him, now, and not mean it. Brian growled deep in his throat; Dom smirked against his mouth but pulled away when Brian lunged forward, escaping the bite Brian aimed at his lip.

“Bastard,” Brian said, and surged forward, knocking his chest against Dom’s, his other hand coming up and bracketing Brian against the car. “Come with me,” he said again. “Be mine.”

Brian felt the word more than heard it. Dom’s voice was always fucking sexy; he hadn’t realized just how hot it would be pressed up against Dom’s chest, that note of laughter hiding in the deep dark rumble. He leaned back so he could look Dom in the eye, swaying a little. Dom was holding more of his weight than he’d meant to put on him.

Dom held his eye for a long moment, his own eyes crinkling just a little at the corners. Happy.

Brian leaned forward and kissed Dom again, still not sure if—if everything was settled between them. If Dom was going to want this, once other people were around and the implications sank in, or if he’d want Brian to tone it down, act straight. He pushed that away and focused on the feel of Dom’s mouth, hot and wet, lighting him up like a lightning strike.

It was good, so fucking good. He could feel his blood picking up as their mouths moved together, his heart fluttering like a goddamn romance novel. And lower, too—it had been a long day, and pain was making his body respond sluggishly, but he could feel Dom starting to get hard against him and goddamn if that didn’t spark all the way through him.

Dom broke away, reluctantly. The light had come up enough that Brian could see his face, faintly. “We should get moving. La Paz is a ways.”

“Yeah.” After a pause, Brian made himself step away. He couldn’t help sneaking a glance as Dom walked around the car to the driver’s side. It still felt like theft, watching Dom move, but holy fuck was he willing to take that risk.
Brian fell asleep almost immediately, dozing restlessly through a couple of Border Patrol checkpoints on US-95 and CA-78. Fucking police state near the border, but Dom’s ID held up alright. He knew it would, knew the answers to give: I work in Phoenix, I'm going to visit my sister in San Diego. Yes, I'm a citizen. No, you don’t have permission to search the car. It's been ages since I saw my nephews, and I had a few days off work.

Dom got a little bit tenser every time he had to go through the routine. Not that he really thought the cops were after them—the cops were after the Bratva, maybe, but not in dusty California. Crossing state lines was primitive but effective. And Border Patrol wasn’t looking for American criminals, anyway.

Even Border Patrol couldn’t quench the breathless thrill of Brian in his passenger seat, sleeping fitfully with a hoodie pulled up to hide the stitches on the side of his head. He looked like shit, like he’d been beaten senseless, like the most stunningly wonderful thing Dom had ever seen.

Brian woke at the border crossing in Mexicali, when the movement of the car stopped because they got caught in morning traffic. But they crossed over without incident, the sun shining down on the glistening car roofs in spite of the stink of exhaust from the trucks hauling produce north.

On the other side of the border, Dom felt lighter. They needed supplies for the fifteen hour drive to La Paz, but he almost didn’t want to stop. Mexicali was full of shops, though, and he pulled into a Mega Comercial Mexicana. Brian reached for the door handle like he was going to go into the store and Dom put out a hand to stop him. “You stay here, get some sleep.”

“I’ve been sleeping.” Brian rolled his shoulders. “Sun’s up, I’m not going to sleep anymore, and you’ve been driving. I can go.”

“You’ve got blood crusted in your hair,” Dom said flatly. There was no way he was letting Brian do anything but rest.

Brian scowled at him and flipped down the visor to look in the little mirror. He looked like he’d been through a wreck: the spot on his temple where he’d been sliced by broken glass was bad enough, black stitches covered by a faintly translucent bandage, but there was a lot of blood crusted in the hair over his ear, and a bruise starting to blacken up all the way down to his cheekbone. Add in his bandaged hands, the stiff way he held himself: he looked like he should be in bed. And he smelled like blood, still, and sweat.

Dom stank a bit too, he knew, but since he didn’t have any broken bones he wasn’t about to relent on this.

Brian sighed. “Fine. Get some food, too, will you?”

Dom’s stomach rumbled sympathetically. “Yeah.” He paused, and then before he could psyche himself out, he leaned over into Brian’s space and kissed him, palm around the uninjured side of his face. Dom let his hand slide down to Brian’s collarbone and straightened, got out of the car. He couldn’t help but smile all the way through the parking lot at the look he’d left on Brian’s face: wide-open, almost shocked, undeniably happy.

Inside the megastore, he collected chips and sunflower seeds and a couple packages of cookies—roadtrip food. He went down a quick list of what they needed: bottles of water, wet wipes, toothbrushes, toothpaste, a package of t-shirts he was pretty sure would fit Brian. He’d never bought clothes for another man before, but t-shirts were t-shirts. Probably.

He didn’t let himself hesitate in the aisle in front of the condoms, just grabbed a package and a bottle of lube. He’d thought about it a lot, driving through the desert with Brian breathing in the seat beside him. He was going to ask Brian to fuck him, he’d decided. He thought he could do it. Like he’d figured before, even if it hurt, it was still Brian. It would be—and anyway if it didn’t work out, if he couldn’t do it, better to know now, before he got used to the idea of having Brian around.

When he got back out to the car, Brian was asleep again, his window rolled down and the seat tilted back. He woke up when Dom tossed the bags into the back seat, and when Dom slid into the driver’s seat it was completely natural to keep going, to lean over and kiss him. And this time it wasn’t the first time he’d done that, it was the third or fourth, and it was starting to feel like something he’d always done. Or at least always wanted to do.

Outside Mexicali, the sun was very bright and the landscape rolled out in front of them, dusty sand on plain, dry hills and shockingly blue sky. Dom watched the road, settling into the long stretch of highway and thinking. Beside him Brian drifted to sleep, aided by the painkillers the PA had given him at Urgent Care and the neck pillow Dom had snagged inside the Mega Comercial. Occasionally he made little pain noises and shifted in his seat. Even in the quiet of the car, the highway rhythm humming through him, Dom felt breathless seeing him there in the seat beside him. He was off the map entirely here. Taking a road he didn’t know at eighty around blind turns. But what was it he’d been telling himself? Doing crazy stupid shit with Brian was the way he wanted to die.

He just wasn’t going to think about it, he decided. His instincts were doing alright so far, and overthinking the turn was what got you killed anyway. Instead he let one hand rest on the edge of the passenger seat, the side of his fingers tucked up against the side of Brian’s leg, and drove.
Brian didn’t wake up until the early afternoon, when Dom stopped for food at a roadside stand. It was very Mexico: the bright sun bleaching the dirt white, a cloud of low brown mountains shading blue on the horizon. Dom could feel himself relaxing in the heat, the quiet. It wasn’t like LA, not at all like the city he’d grown up in, but it felt like home. 

Brian was less relaxed, looking around him with eyes that were bright and curious, if not totally free of pain. Dom saw him clock everyone else in the area, the old man running the food stand, the other people sitting and eating or passing by. More than anything, though, he watched Dom. 

His gaze was a warm kind of pressure; Dom found himself looking back more than he ought to. More than was appropriate. But fuck appropriate, he thought, and anyway he had sunglasses on. No one could stop him from looking. 

Brian must have felt his gaze, because he smirked and tapped the cast on his left wrist against the table edge. “I’m driving this next stretch.”

Dom snorted a laugh. “You think you are.”

“Come on, man.”

“You’re not driving my car one-handed through the mountains, cariño.”

Brian widened his eyes pitifully, joking around, and Dom was struck by the strangeness of it. It was—not how a grown man acts, all flirty and coy. He blinked, remembering the times he’d seen Brian play gay. Remembering how that felt brave, somehow. Weak but also much braver than Dom had ever been because Brian wasn’t afraid to appear weak. It left a strange taste in his mouth, but not, he decided after a second of consideration, a bad one. Brian had always challenged him.

Brian finally got his hands on the wheel after a few hours of the long, wide-open stretches of the Carretera Transpeninsular. It helped dissipate the boredom of sitting in the passenger seat. It also helped stop him from worrying about what the fuck he was doing in a country where he didn’t speak the language, without access to his money until he could get into a bank to transfer cash. He didn’t have any of his own clothes. Starting to think again was the downside of recovering. But Dom’s car was a delight, loads of power hiding just under the unassuming exterior. 

Dom didn’t sleep in the passenger seat, but he did pull out his phone when it started buzzing, and then spent a bit replying to texts. Brian bit his tongue, but his curiosity was eating at him, and his posture must’ve given him away. Dom glanced over wryly and said, “Letty and Jacinto are off on their honeymoon cruise. I know you were worried.”

Brian tapped his fingertips on the wheel. “She’s texting you from her honeymoon?” He was surprised to find jealousy burning up his gut. He wasn’t a jealous person, but Letty and Dom had always been incredibly good together. Incredibly hot together, too. 

Dom laughed. “Nah. Jacinto’s mother.”

“Jacinto’s mother texts you?”

“She has this idea that running a crew is a lot like having seven children.” Dom rolled his eyes affectionately and kept thumbing through his phone. “Leon made it to Austin. He’s hooking up with some chick he knows there. Vince is in Mexico City already, crashed out.” He glanced over. “He might have some work there in a few days.”

Brian nodded. 

“And here’s what you’re really interested in,” Dom continued. “Pearce says he’s fine, this unlicensed doctor does seem to have gone to medical school, Kumiko’s a bitch, he expects to be in Vegas a couple more weeks while she heals up and then he might drop her sorry ass in Florida and head south.”

“Rome texted you?” Brian looked over, surprised.

“Mia.”
“Mia?”

“Sure,” Dom said laconically. “She’s staying with them. Someone needed to rent them a space.”

And it wasn’t going to be the woman with a bullet wound in her thigh or the dark-skinned black man with blood under his fingernails, Brian filled in silently. Mia could move more freely, too, without worrying about being spotted by a Bratva footsoldier. “All three of them holed up in a motel somewhere? I’m not sorry to miss that.”

Dom snorted. “Me neither.”

“Does he say where he’s going after that?”

Dom shook his head.

“Dammit. He has all my shit.” Brian scowled. “My go-bag was in the trunk of his car and I was too out of it to grab it.”

“He’s welcome in La Paz.”

“Mm.”

“I’ve been trying to get Mia to come down,” Dom added after a minute. “The property has space for the whole crew. You’ll see.”

Brian liked the sound of that. The whole family together.

#

Dom took the wheel again late in the afternoon, and Brian dozed fitfully through the last several hours of the drive. He woke again when Dom pulled off the highway onto a bumpy side street. Foot traffic, bicycles and scooters clogged the road, and they inched along past houses with white walls that glowed in the dim yellow light of the streetlamps and the bright white-blue light of the energy-efficient bulbs that were popular outside private homes.

Dom turned down a less populated road and they sped up, for just a minute. “That’s Leon’s place,” Dom said, and pointed at an adobe wall with the second story of a house sprouting above it.

Dom turned into the driveway of the property next door, and got out to open the gate. Getting back in, he said, “Vince had a chick in town for a while, but they’re broken up, so he’s always over at Leon’s or mine.”

Inside the house was dim and cool, and the fatigue of driving for fifteen hours hit him all at once. Sitting in a car while someone else drove should be not so exhausting, but Brian ate the leftovers from their dinner stop with his eyes half-closed, and then stumbled after Dom in a daze. He managed to strip off his shoes and pants before climbing into the bed Dom pointed him to, and fell asleep to the sounds of Dom moving around the room, kicking his travel duffel around the floor, brushing his teeth in the adjoining bathroom.

##

Dom should have been exhausted, but something about a long-haul drive like that always left him restless afterward, wanting to move after sitting in one place for fifteen hours. When he came out of the bathroom and saw Brian sacked out on the bed, though, he couldn’t help but smile. Half his face was a bruise, his boxers skewed awkwardly on his ass, his arms stretched out a pulling a pillow under his face like a giant kid snuggling a stuffed animal.

He hadn’t brought anything with him, just come along when Dom asked him to get in the car. Hadn’t given any sign of ever thinking twice about it. Partly that was just Brian, sure; he didn’t waste time making decisions. But Dom knew in his bones that Brian had dropped everything for him, for Dom specifically.

Thinking about that was still too huge to even know what to do with. But Brian sleeping in his bed was a good start.

Dom heaved in a breath and pushed off the door frame. He would let Brian sleep. He paced the house, quietly of course, checking the windows and doors and if any spiders had moved in while he’d been in Vegas.

Outside, it looked like a couple of stray cats had set themselves up in the corner of the property where the adobe walls met in a sharp corner. He left their nest alone; probably once the house was lived in again they’d take off on their own. And it wasn’t a problem until they started having kittens inside the cars being repaired in the yard.

Everything was in order, of course, but it was nice to stretch his legs walking the property. It was almost an acre, mostly flat clay, ringed in eight-foot adobe walls—it was Mexico, after all, and a man’s home security was a basic kind of thing, that started with solid walls topped with broken glass—several trees, two covered parking spots for cars beside the garage. It wasn’t his mother’s house in Echo Park, but it was home for now.

Brian would need a spot for a car. Technically the garage could fit two, but he wanted room to move around with tools and parts. He might have to build something up. Well, first Brian would
need a car. Javier would have something, maybe, or would know who to talk to.

Finally some of the restlessness eased out of his muscles and he wandered back inside. Brian was still sound asleep in the middle of his bed, and he did his best to be quiet as he stripped down to his boxer briefs. But when he sat down on the bed and tried to edge Brian over so he could fit on his own damn mattress, Brian stirred and blinked open his eyes.

“Hey.” His voice was thick with sleepiness, but he carefully rolled over to give Dom room on the bed, then immediately rolled back, draping his arm over Dom’s chest and one gangly knee over Dom’s leg.

Dom tilted his face into Brian’s hair and breathed in. He smelled like an entire long day in a car, and cheap soap, and a little bit like antiseptic and blood, still.

“I want you to fuck me,” Dom said, very quietly, so quiet it was hard to hear above the fan in the other room.

“Mm.” Dom could feel Brian crooking a smile against the bare skin of his shoulder. “Okay.”

“You always do that.”

Brian lifted his head but it was too dark to make out the expression on his face. “Do what?”

“Just agree. When I ask you to do something.”

Brian lightly bit Dom’s shoulder. His voice was full of laughter when he said, “It isn’t hard to agree when you’re asking me to do something I already want to do.”

“Bri.”

Dom didn’t know what was in his voice, just that he was half losing control. Brian leaned in and brushed his mouth over Dom’s mouth, then pulled back. “I trust you.”

“Yeah, okay, so.” Dom swallowed. “Will you?”

“Fuck,” Brian said, reverent, and kissed him again. “Yes, anything. Christ.” He dove into the kiss again, rougher. Dom’s hands found their way to his waist, his ass, where the muscles were flexing as he held himself up over Dom to get a good angle in the kiss. He was deceptively pretty, Brian was. But Dom liked this side of him better, the live wire snapping with sparks. Dom slid his hands up his shirt and pushed it up to his armpits.

Brian broke away panting and kneeled up, peeling his shirt off and then urging Dom over onto his stomach. He slid his fingertips down Dom’s back and hips, catching his underwear and taking them down. Dom kicked them off, trying to hide the way his stomach was in knots. He’d thought about this, he knew what he wanted. It didn’t matter what it actually felt like, he still wanted it.

Brian either couldn’t tell how nervous he was or was politely ignoring it. He ran his fingertips up and down Dom’s sides, not quite light enough to tickle, then followed them with his mouth, kissing along Dom’s ribs, up one side and down the other. The hair on his thighs prickled against the back of Dom’s legs.

“Shit, I need—I know there’s lube around here somewhere.”

Dom waved a hand vaguely at the duffel he’d tossed against the closet door. Brian bounced out of bed and then back again, and Dom braced himself, his head to the side so he could see Brian moving in his peripheral vision. This whole thing was harder than he’d expected, like making himself hold still while someone moved around behind him with a knife in their hand. He made himself keep breathing evenly. It would fuck everything up if Brian knew he was freaking out. He relaxed his jaw, the muscles in his neck. If Brian was willing to do literally anything Dom asked him to, including drop everything and follow him to a foreign country with zero promises made, this was just the other side of that. He was Brian’s, he reminded himself. Nothing held back.

Brian popped the top on the lube and then laughed. “Okay, hold on, I don’t have any hands. I did not think this through.”

Dom shifted his weight, looking back. “Just—”

But Brian pressed on the back of his neck with his fingertips and he settled again. “Don’t worry, baby, I got you.”

Dom breathed in and let it out slowly, expecting—Brian’s cock probably. That was fine. He could take it.

What he wasn’t expecting was the fingers on his neck to slide down his spine to his lower back, still pressing him down to the bed, and then sudden sharp pain as Brian sunk his teeth into Dom’s ass cheek.

“Ow! You fucker.”

Brian laughed again, dark and sweet. “You love me.”

Dom squeezed his eyes shut tight. “Yeah, I do.”

Brian swallowed so hard Dom could hear it, and then the next thing he knew Brian’s hot, wet
mouth came down and licked from just behind Dom’s balls all the way up his ass, over his hole.

“Fuck.” Dom was so startled it almost didn’t even feel like anything, but Brian repeated the motion without hesitation and that felt fucking amazing. It pushed him right out of his head, lit him up until he had to push back onto his hands and knees to get his face out of the pillow, he was breathing so hard. Sounds got tangled up in his throat, only occasionally escaping as a low groan. Brian was making noise, though, moans and mumbled words that Dom couldn’t make out the blood was rushing in his ears so loudly. He wasn’t thinking in words anyway, just sensations. Brian’s left hand just fingertips on his back, his right scratchy with bandages but his palm and thumb firmly gripping the spot where Dom’s thigh became his ass, thumb pulling him open like a grapefruit. Brian’s lips and teeth and tongue, pressing at his hole, getting him wet everywhere and then coming back and pressing again, a little more. Dom’s whole body was being persuaded, lick by lick, to want what it didn’t have yet.

Then Brian dipped his head and caught Dom’s sack in his mouth, very gently sucking, and the sound in Dom’s throat surprised him by coming out as a single word. “Please.”

Brian made a low sound, almost pained, and kept sucking and licking until Dom couldn’t take it. He didn’t know where he was going—Brian was driving here—but he was done going slow. “Come on.” His voice so low it barely sounded right in his own ears.

Brian licked his way back to Dom’s hole, pressing again and again with his tongue, and reached around to palm Dom’s cock with his right hand. He was hard, Dom realized. He hadn’t been earlier—but he was definitely hard now.

Brian was going to fuck him, and he was going to like it. The surge of shame that shot through him only made his heart pound faster.

Then Brian was fumbling with the bottle of lube again, running his thumb around Dom’s hole. The coldness of the lube was uncomfortable but it didn’t hurt exactly. And he was running so hot it didn’t matter. Somewhere in the jumble of sensations it was like a switch had flipped and now the thrill of fear was only feeding into how much he wanted it.

Danger had always made him a little hard.

Brian’s thumb slipped out of him and then the head of Brian’s cock was right there, pressing at him.

Dom breathed out, and deliberately relaxed as much as he could, and Brian slowly, slowly slid into him until his thighs were flush with the backs of Dom’s legs.

Again, it was so intense that his brain couldn’t quite process whether it was hot or cold, good or bad, painful or something else. He couldn’t think. And then Brian did it again, and Dom could feel his body re-shaping around this newness, learning it. On the third stroke, Brian got a better angle, and that was that, they were off and running, Dom pushing back into it, his body greedy like he never knew he could be. It was so, so good, good beyond words, the noises coming out of his mouth like animal grunts and groans, but he was too far gone to even think of being embarrassed.

Brian’s mouth was still fucking functioning, of course. “Oh my god, baby. Fuck. You’re so—so fucking hot. Gorgeous—your fucking back. Your ass. Fuck—I can’t believe you let me—”

Dom rode the wave higher and higher, letting the movement take him there. “You’re taking it so well—just like that—fuck.”

Dom bowed his neck and closed his eyes, holding his weight on one arm and jacking himself with the other hand. His orgasm was slow to build—too much happening in his body to process. But then Brian was saying, “I love—I love the way you want me in you—want to get up in you and never fucking leave—” and it all came together at once, this surge of feeling that took him and tumbled him so hard his arm half buckled, and Brian was crying out and following him down.

Brian woke tangled in the sheets, Dom snoring lightly beside him and the early morning sunshine bright on his face. Somewhere, he could hear seabirds; he hadn’t realized they were that close to the ocean.

He still didn’t have his own clothes, just what Dom had quickly picked up for him in Mexicali. At some point he was going to need to go shopping. He could steal Dom’s stuff for a little while, but he didn’t want to be a nuisance.

He did steal a bathrobe off the door in the bathroom, white and fuzzy, and draped it around his shoulders. A coffeemaker sat on the counter in the kitchen. Past the kitchen door, there was a little patio with a palm tree and a couple of wire chairs. Brian took his coffee out there. It was almost warm, and the breeze off the water carried the sound of waves. He couldn’t see the water, but the walled-in property was better, in some ways. Nobody could see him wearing someone else’s bathrobe and nothing else.

A sound in the kitchen made him turn his head just as Dom stepped out, wearing nothing but thin sweatpants low on his hips and holding his own mug of coffee in his hand.
“Morning.”

He and Dom had fucked. He was pretty sure it wasn’t a dream, anyway. It didn’t seem like a dream, and the way Dom was looking at him now felt like—Brian closed his eyes, suppressing a thrill, then opened them again, feeling daring. “I was just thinking I could get you to fuck me outdoors without scandalizing any neighbors. The wall is high enough.”

Dom laughed, the smile staying on his face after. “Long as the crew is all out of town, sure. When they’re around you never know who might wander in looking to borrow something from the garage.”

Dom bent down and kissed him soundly on the mouth, then pulled the other chair close enough to his side that their knees bumped when Brian swung his outward only an inch. “Speaking of,” Dom said, pulling a cell phone out of his pocket. “I’m not sure if I’m more worried that Pearce is going to murder Mia, or that she’s going to murder him.”

Brian smirked and thumbed through the cell phone. Mia’s complaints about how annoying Rome was scrolled by. She called him Rome, too—not that he was going to suggest to Dom that murder might not be the thing to worry about. Mia was a grown-ass woman, she could make her own mistakes. Brian made a mental note to call Rome soon, though. He wanted to make sure he wasn’t going to jet off to Tokyo or where-the-fuck-ever with Brian’s favorite t-shirts.

“Mia might come visit for a while,” Dom said. “I don’t know if you spotted her text about it.”

“Isn’t she in school? Nursing school or whatever?”

Dom took a drink of coffee. “She’s pregnant. Think she’s gonna keep it, so. I told her she was welcome to stay here. If she wants to take a semester off.”

“Oh wow.” Brian felt his eyebrows go up. That put a different spin on Mia’s complaints about Rome. Or, maybe it didn’t.

“She might stay at Letty’s place, though. It’s closer to the beach, down that way,” Dom gestured. “And I don’t think even Letty knows when she’ll be back from her honeymoon.”

“Alright.” Brian knocked his knee against Dom’s again. “So if we want to fuck on the patio we better get it while we can.”

Dom looked him up and down. “Oh, you can get it.”

Brian smirked and bit his lip, just a little—not even on purpose, although he filed it away when Dom growled, eyes flashing, and reached out and slid his hand up Brian’s thigh, pushing away the loose bathrobe.

#

After a quick and dirty blowjob on the patio that ended with Brian kneeling up over Dom in the poor wire chair while Dom jerked him off all over his abs, Dom wrapped his hands in plastic and shoved him into the shower, then dragged him around the house. The house was bigger than Brian had first thought when they’d arrived in the dark. It was all a single story, but it sprawled down a couple of hallways with extra bedrooms in one direction and a big open room in the other that looked like it should have something in it: a piano, maybe, if this were a fancy kind of house. Or a huge TV with a couple of gaming consoles and enough controllers for the whole crew and anyone they wanted to invite in.

It was nothing like Daisy’s house, the curve of the adobe walls making the sunlight coming in the windows soft and welcoming and homely, not chill and sharp. Daisy would do better in a house like this, Brian couldn’t help but think. She’d be happier with fewer sharp corners to bruise herself on. But she’d made her own choices. Maybe he’d see her again someday, if she didn’t drink herself to death, if she lost Isay and found a way to survive it.

Beyond the main room, there was a pantry off the kitchen and then the door to the garage. It was a beautiful garage, obviously the focus of Dom’s time and attention. It was tempting to settle in, poke around, but Brian’s stomach started growling and Dom laughed at him. “Come on. Let’s get some food.”

The grocery store was pretty close, just down the narrow neighborhood road to the main highway and a couple minutes toward the center of La Paz—slow minutes, over roads crowded with people. Brian wandered his way through the aisles, picking things up but putting them back down again because he didn’t have any money on him and he hadn’t relied on anyone else to pay for groceries since he was, like, twelve. Putting anything in with Dom’s pile of chips and bread and mangos would have been too weird on top of everything else, though when he wandered up to Dom, Dom raised an eyebrow and asked, “You don’t want anything?”

Making a mental note to find a bank that would let him wire himself cash, Brian picked out a pack of cigarettes and some beer. He could let Dom buy him a beer or six.

The auto parts store they hit next was more comfortable. Dom knew the owner, Javier, a grizzled man who looked like he could be a fisherman on the coast, dark brown with sun. Dom leaned against the counter and chatted while Brian pondered buying parts for a car he was only just starting to dream about buying.
Stupid to buy parts when you didn’t know what kind of car you’d want to put them into. Really he should be thinking about where to find a car. Something new, something that would stand up to the Chevelle of Dom’s he still hadn’t seen. Or maybe he should be hoping to need the kind of car that he could take to work as part of Dom’s crew. An Eclipse Spyder, maybe—the one Rome had had for a minute in Miami was a lot of fun, and Baja was the perfect place for a convertible.

“¿Quién es el estadounidense?” The clerk didn’t speak English, but seemed friendly enough. Maybe he’d know where to start looking for an Eclipse in decent shape.

 Dom acted like he hadn’t heard the question for a second, just handed over some cash, then tilted his head ruefully. “Es mi novio.”

The man’s eyebrows shot up, but he didn’t say anything, just shook his head and kept bagging up the odds and ends Dom was buying.

Brian knew he’d heard right, but by the time they were back in the car he’d half-convinced himself he hadn’t actually.

Dom hadn’t actually told his parts guy that Brian was his boyfriend.

Casually, Brian asked, “Novio, huh?”

“No, pareja better?” Dom scowled out the window. “As far as I know those are the words to choose from in Spanish. Unless you’re talking marido or esposa, like legal spouses, but we’d have to go over to Chihuahua. Or down the coast, Colima maybe, or all the way to Campeche. It’s not legal through the whole country.”

Brian kept his voice light enough that it could be taken as a joke, although his mouth was suddenly dry. “Are you—are you asking me to marry you? Did you just—propose, right now in this car?”

Dom cleared his throat. “I’m just improving your Spanish, cariño. Your accent is terrible.”

“It’ll get better.” Brian’s heart was pounding like he’d just flipped the switch on a car full of NOS. “Couple weeks of practice and I’ll be speaking like I was born here.”

Dom grunted skeptically.

A few minutes of winding streets, slowed by mid-day pedestrian traffic, and Dom directed him down a side-street, through his gate and into a parking spot at the back of the house. As he pulled the bags of groceries out of the car, Dom said, so casually he had to be doing it deliberately, “Campeche is farther away but it has pyramids. Mayans and shit.”

“I would, you know,” Brian said abruptly. He couldn’t take his eyes off Dom’s face in profile as he walked toward the house—his house, where he’d brought Brian. His home. Dom glanced over sharply. “I’ve never seen a pyramid in person. That would be badass.”

Dom looked at him again, pausing as he unlocked the deadbolts on the door. There was a smile on his face, a real one, soft and secret around the corners of his eyes, and even though he didn’t say anything Brian felt something settle in his heart, some piece of machinery slip into place with a nearly-audible snap. Right where it was supposed to be.

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